Ladybird

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at http://archiveofourown.org/works/38814228.

Rating:	Explicit
Archive Warning:	Creator Chose Not To Use Archive Warnings
Category:	M/M
Fandom:	Hannibal (TV)
Relationship:	Will Graham/Hannibal Lecter
Characters:	Hannibal Lecter, Will Graham, Mason Verger, Margot Verger, Donald Sutcliffe, Randall Tier, Leonard Brauer, Fred Lounds, Bedelia Du Maurier, Nicholas Boyle, Franklyn Froideveaux, Jack Crawford, Eldon Stammets, Cassandra Boyle, Matthew Brown (Hannibal), Abigail Hobbs, Jimmy Price (as Lord James Price), Brian Zeller (as Lord Brian Price), Tobias Budge, Peter Bernadone (as Peter Bernard), Elliot Buddish
Additional Tags:	Blow Jobs, Unresolved Sexual Tension, Dancing, Gambling, Frottage, opera - Freeform, POV Alternating, Strangers to Lovers, Costume Parties & Masquerades, Taunting, Swearing, Drinking, Horseback Riding, Dinner Parties, Card Games, Sketching, Playing Piano, Literature, Dirty Talk, swimming outdoors, Jealousy, Smut, Masturbation, Mutual Masturbation, Nipple Licking, Nipple Play, Body Worship, Anal Fingering, Anal Sex, Riding, Outdoor Sex, 69 (Sex Position), Rimming, Orgasm Delay/Denial, Rough Sex, Angry Sex, First Kiss, Kissing, Fluff, Gossip, Scandal, Blackmail, Secrets, Misunderstandings, Angst, Mutual Pining, Happy Ending, Historical, Alternate Universe - Historical, Alternate Universe - Regency, Regency, Regency Romance
Language:	English
Stats:	Published: 2022-05-05 Completed: 2022-08-28 Words: 97,549 Chapters: 20/20

Ladybird

by FragileTeacup

Summary

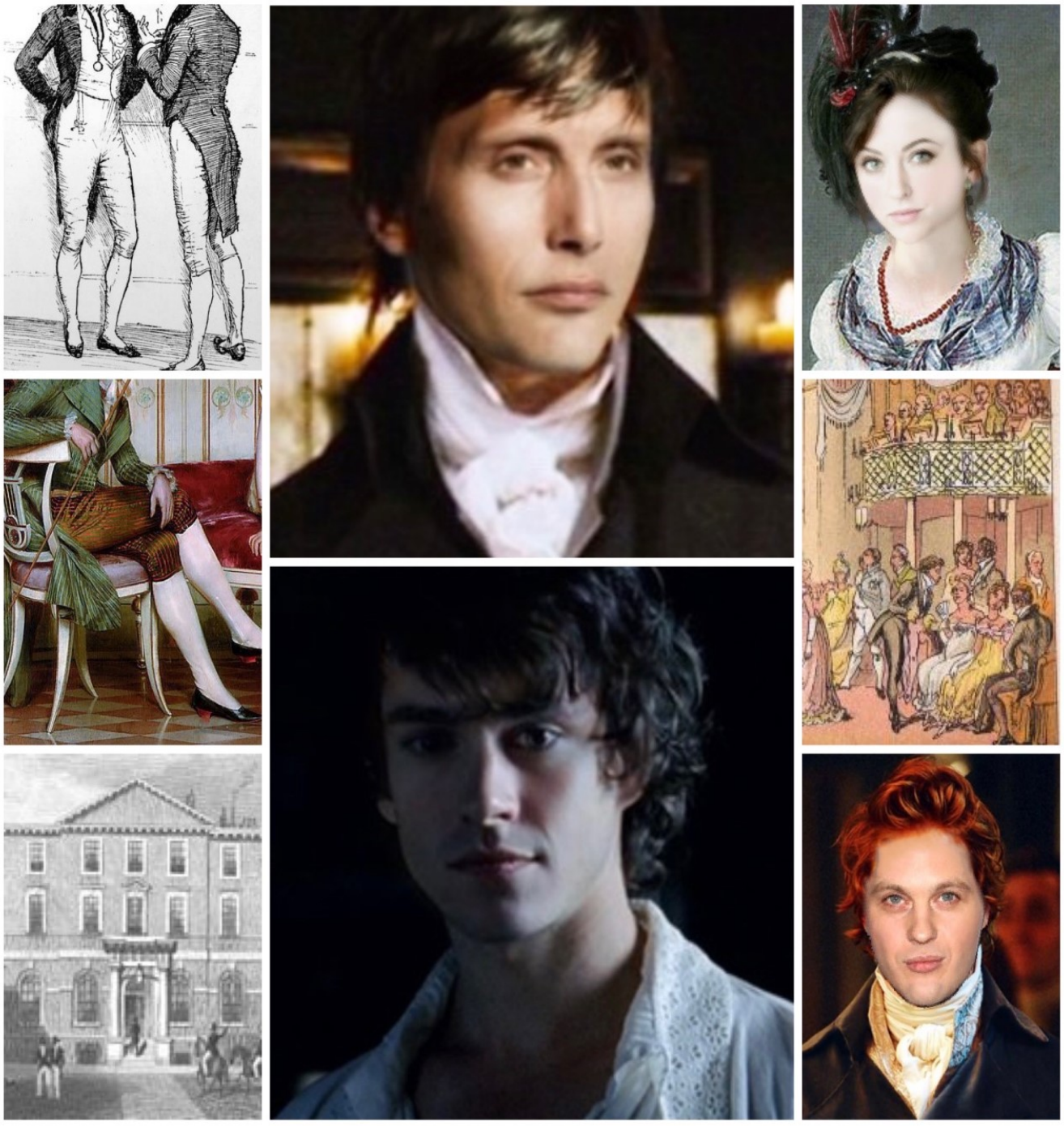
What do you get for the count who has everything?

London, in the spring of 1814. With Parliament dissolved, the wealthy and exclusive *ton* is set to disperse as the Season draws to a close.
After a wearying round of parties and balls, Count Hannibal Lecter is looking forward to celebrating his twenty-fourth birthday at Lecter House, his country estate in Derbyshire. Just a few more engagements and he will be freed from the rapacious attentions of society mothers determined to rid themselves of their darling offspring.
Will Graham is a young man seeking escape in reckless abandonment to pleasure. But as the capital begins to empty, his options are starting to look unpleasantly narrow.
Enter Lady Margot Verger, dear friend of the count, whose interest is piqued by her brother's gleeful tale of the night he and Hannibal encountered a beautiful boy in the Top Room of Quant's, an exclusive club in the heart of Mayfair. When the boy turns up again, Lady Margot begins to formulate a plan for a very special birthday surprise...

Ladybird: (*noun*) Regency slang for a kept lover.

The fic is complete!

Pretty boy



‘There are few sights more pleasing than that of a pretty boy on his knees. Do not you agree, Lecter?’

The uppermost room of Quant's is stifling, the inevitable result of an unusually clement May and a surfeit of bodies. Hannibal casts disdainful eyes over the rowdy set and gestures with his wine glass.

‘How do you expect me to see anything in this mêlée?’ Drops spatter scarlet on the beige carpet; a servant hurries over with a silver jug and promptly refills the glass. With a curt nod of acknowledgement, Hannibal clips, ‘Bring another for Lord Verger.’

‘Yes, my lord.’

The servant, in full dress uniform, is perspiring. Repulsed, Hannibal moves swiftly past him, seeking an empty space beside a pillar or within an alcove. Better still, by a window. Every seat is occupied, every table crammed elbow to elbow. Here, in this chamber known quaintly as the Top Room, are gathered the most vainglorious and dissolute of London’s aristocracy, celebrating the dissolution of Parliament in a particular way allowed only within these four walls - or their own bedchambers.

‘Spotted him yet?’ Mason, at his elbow, grins, enjoying the game. His wavy red hair is peaked in a quiff, green eyes bright with a natural vivacity that he has carried from childhood.

‘At the present moment, I am far more interested in acquiring a chair than a view of -’

- *a pretty boy on his knees*. Except that *pretty* is far too insipid a word to do justice to the exceptional beauty of the creature before them.

The boy faces away, angled towards the fireplace and a high-backed armchair of brown leather. The armchair’s occupant is familiar: Donald Sutcliffe, a baron renowned for his petty temper and louche habits. Red of hair and face, he grips the arms of the chair so tightly that his knuckles are white. A brusque call for a screen and the pair are shielded. Undeterred, Hannibal circles the room until he has them once more in his sights. He ignores the baron - as far as he is able - and allows his gaze to linger on the boy. Dissecting, cataloguing.

Slight of form, milk white skin, dainty high-arched feet, eyes of seafoam blue, defined black brows, a sultry red pout, narrow nose, dishevelled black curls that brush a slender nape.

Quant's relieves its members of their outer garments - greatcoats, high-crowned hats, walking canes, etcetera - at the ground floor entrance. Everything is whisked away with minimum fuss and maximum care. Before entering the Top Room, one may avail oneself of certain items in the tapestried anteroom (Quant's prides itself on offering a formidable range of accessories, from cigars imported from the Americas to leather riding crops) and after that, well, what happens *within* is never spoken of *without*, unless one wishes to risk expulsion from the club and the general censure of the ton.

All of this notwithstanding, the crassness of advertising one’s proclivities in public holds little appeal for Hannibal, and on most visits he remains resolutely buttoned and booted. There are, of course, occasions when he will make an exception, dependent entirely on the capriciousness of his mood and (perhaps more crucially) the company available. But his preference is to watch, to study, gaining objective pleasure from each sordid little diorama in a fashion not dissimilar to that of the art aficionado who thrills at the viewing of a Gainsborough or a Reynolds.

The subject holding Hannibal’s attention now would, he thinks idly, make an excellent muse. Had Romney lived to see such purity of profile, the boy might even perhaps have supplanted Lady Hamilton in his artistic affections.

The boy is, to put it mildly, *informally* attired: barefoot, white linen shirt hanging loose from one narrow shoulder and falling almost to the knees of beige breeches. His elbows rest nonchalantly on the baron’s thighs as he kneels with perfect posture between them. One hand is curled delicately about a cock (of middling size) that rises from a gap in disarranged clothing. It is clear from the baron’s heaving chest and glazed expression that he is heavily aroused. He says something beneath his breath and the boy laughs, light and high. He leans forward and flicks the tip of his tongue over the baron’s quivering cockhead. Then he sits back, tilts his head as if in consideration, says something in return and laughs again.

‘Look at that,’ breathes Mason. ‘Lord Sutcliffe, bested at last. The man looks completely smitten.’

‘His lover is a tease,’ dismisses Hannibal, hard eyes noting the almost imperceptible play of the boy’s fingers as they tighten and loosen and tighten again. ‘What Sutcliffe is smitten with is the attainment of an orgasm.’

‘Perhaps, but you must own that he has bought himself an exquisite creature. That mouth…’

They both fall silent as the boy lips against the side of the now-leaking cock. Prettily-fringed eyes flutter closed and he begins sucking up and down its length. The baron curses, grasps the boy’s hair, and manoeuvres him to take it into his mouth entirely. For a few moments the boy complies, but as soon as the baron’s grip eases he lifts off again, leaving a slick trail down bobbing flesh. His pout is now decidedly pronounced and more sulky than sultry, Hannibal notes with amusement.

‘A tease and stubborn to boot. One can only imagine the trouble he must be when less gainfully employed.’

‘Worth it, I would say.’ Mason leans in, tone confidential. ‘According to Visconte Pazzi, Sutcliffe has installed the boy in his Mayfair townhouse. He must be a sensational fuck for the baron to have abandoned all discretion.’

‘Verger, you look downright salacious just now. I suggest you find a suitable outlet before the baron notices your interest and decides to take offence.’

‘Offence?’ scoffs Mason. ‘With a mere flimsy screen between his modesty and us? The man is a noted exhibitionist.’

‘His young whore, too, it would seem.’

‘Mm, assuredly.’ Mason rubs furtively at the slight bulge in his breeches. ‘Come to think of it, I saw Brown at cards when we came in. He might be ready for a change of sport.’

As Mason wanders off in search of Matthew Brown, his sometime paramour, Hannibal takes advantage of a suddenly vacant chair and draws it across, that he might more comfortably enjoy the show. He crosses his legs at the knee, holds up his glass in silent demand for another top up, tolerates the still-perspiring servant’s attentions as he appears instantly with the jug, and waves him away again before settling to sip slowly.

Whatever the boy had been objecting to before, a compromise appears to have been reached: he is alternating, now, between strong sucks of the head and flicking licks. The baron’s face is positively puce; this will not take much longer. In contrast, the boy’s countenance is serene. It is impossible to tell whether he himself is aroused, for the voluminous shirt hides all; he might just as well be enjoying an ice sorbet as a hard cock. A few gasps, stifled behind a fist, and Lord Sutcliffe is coming all over the pretty boy’s face. This, too, is taken in stride. A handkerchief is produced, employed, and afterwards rather naughtily stuffed into the baron’s coat pocket.

Upon a muttered instruction the boy rises, sinuous and lanky. He stretches linked hands above his head and performs a half-pirouette.

That is when his gaze catches Hannibal’s.

The most curious moment hangs suspended between them, as if all else has fallen into shadow.

Bemused by his own sense of whimsy, Hannibal takes some more wine, his eyes never breaking from the boy's as he holds against his tongue sweet currant and spices. A half-tilt of the boy's head as he rocks up on his toes could indicate defiance, challenge - or interest. The twitching of his own cock reminds Hannibal that it has been too long since he took a lover. Of course, he will not remain in the capital long now that Parliament has been dissolved. One final ball at Almack's Assembly Rooms, then Mozart at the Theatre Royal, and the Season will be over. Perhaps, though, a quick dalliance? A few rooms adjacent to this one are reserved for the most exclusive of guests, should they wish at any point to retire in order that they might continue their *entertainments* in a setting altogether more discreet. Hannibal has made little use of these facilities this year - the pickings have been slim. Perhaps he should treat himself. What would it take, he wonders, to prise the boy from the baron's side? A smile? A roll of notes tucked discreetly inside the waist of his breeches, with a silent motion to follow him out?

The arrival of a servant with a message for Lord Sutcliffe upends these pleasant musings. Curses colour the air, clothes are straightened, and a brusque gesture sets the boy to repairing his own appearance as best he can - although, as they emerge from behind the screen, he has still the appearance of one who has only moments before tumbled out of bed. The baron stomps across the room, past Hannibal - evidently, he has remained unaware the entire time of his audience - and the boy follows. There is a fluidity to his movements, a languorous sway of hips that is at once provocative and entirely careless. The boy walks directly behind Hannibal's chair and there is a change in the air when he lingers. Hannibal tenses as the lightest of touches grazes his nape. He does not turn, but he knows the instant the boy has quitted the room. Odd, how colour and sound dim for several moments afterwards.

Hannibal does not go seeking further company, and that night he wraps his fist around his cock and comes, breathing harshly, to vivid imaginings of insolent blue eyes and a feathering touch.

***

'What will it be tonight, my lord?'

Randall, looking slightly green, holds up a choice of evening apparel. It is just the two of them in this modest set of apartments at Albany, a labyrinthine mansion that is home also to eight-and-sixty other bachelors and their menservants, the latter of whom - according to the latest tattle - the rogue valet has been steadily fucking his way through. Hannibal tolerates this off-duty behaviour because the man's loyalty is absolute, and because he is wonderfully adept at procuring whatever private entertainment Hannibal might, at any given time, have a fancy for.

'I think the black tailcoat with the silver waistcoat.'

'Black breeches in silk or leather, my lord?'

'Silk.' Hannibal grimaces, folding his newspaper and casting it aside. He rises from the chaise longue. 'I can only imagine how damnably hot it will be. Leather would just about finish me off. Is the bath prepared?'

'Yes, my lord.'

'Very well. Verger will be calling for me and you know that he never keeps time. If he should arrive early -'

'I have set the claret to breathing and laid out a tray of sweetmeats.'

‘Marzipan?’

‘Of course.’

‘Thank you, Randall. And now, for pity’s sake, go and mix a powder for yourself. I cannot have you looking bilious when we are expecting company.’

‘Very good, my lord.’ With a grateful bow ending in a slight wince, the valet retires.

***

‘I heard a rumour about you.’

A different chamber tonight, vast and colourful: Almack’s main assembly room. Amid a rainbow array of gowns and embroidered waistcoats, there are still a handful of rare jewels that stand out from the crowd. And few sparkle as brightly as the young lady with coiled black hair and green eyes who has just accosted Hannibal as he stands at a refreshment table ladling punch into a silver cup.

‘Yes?’

He offers her the cup and she accepts with a smile brimful of merriment.

‘Very much yes. Would you like to know what it is?’

‘I daresay you shall tell me, whether I indicate any interest in the subject or not.’ He pours himself a cup and drains it, then quickly pours another. ‘What the deuce is this sickly stuff?’

‘Ratafia.’ She tuts. ‘You are not supposed to drink it so quickly. Moderation, my lord. That is the key.’

‘Such a word on your pretty lips is strangeness itself, Lady Margot.’

‘Not so! One may pick from the Tree of Knowledge without eating its fruit, sir.’

Above the orchestra’s zealous playing, they share laughter that echoes with a lifetime of familiarity. Theirs is a tightly-knit circle; and when the exodus to country life begins in just a few short days, they shall be travelling up to Derbyshire in close succession.

‘This rumour -’

‘Ha, so much for indifference!’

Hannibal knows better than to take the bait. ‘It has come from Verger, I will be bound, and is therefore not worth the telling. He is a more awful dramatist even than you.’

‘Do I hear my name being besmeared?’ Up strolls Mason, a glass of ruby wine in each hand.

‘Blame your sister, not I.’ Unruffled, Hannibal plucks one glass from his friend’s grasp. ‘I assume that this is for me. Or are you on the cut already? It is a little early for that, even for you.’

‘Damn it all, Lecter. Cannot a man be prepared for the eventuality of drought?’ Mason pouts but makes no attempt to reclaim the drink. ‘Now come, what was it that you were saying before?’

‘Apparently, you have been telling tales about me again.’

‘Only to Meg and Brown,’ protests Mason. ‘Not the general populace.’

‘Ah, so you did locate Mr Brown the other night. I wondered why you never returned to find me. Helpful in scratching your itch, was he?’

Mason’s snort of laughter prompts an offended huff from the nearby Marchioness of Moray, who gathers her long skirts and her large entourage and wafts away.

‘Honestly, Mason, I cannot take you anywhere,’ complains Margot. ‘You shall see me dropped from the ton. Oh, to have been blessed with a twin sister instead of a rogue of a brother!’

Entirely unrepentant, her brother grins. ‘It is four-and-twenty years too late to be making that wish, Meg.’

Before them sweep dozens of couples, crowding the floor yet somehow, miraculously, managing to avoid collisions as they perform a stately country dance down the centre of the room.

‘Why so slow?’ Mason blanches. ‘Does the conductor wish for everyone to fall asleep on their feet?’

Hannibal turns to observe the dance. ‘You would prefer to be always jumping about, Verger? I have always thought -’

But the sentence goes unfinished. *He* is here. The boy from Quant's. On his feet this time rather than his knees. Dancing, but not with Lord Sutcliffe. Instead, his latest partner of questionable choice is Lord Brauer. The last Hannibal had heard, the earl was taking the waters in Bath to recover from an excess of *good living*. Judging from the man’s rapacious leer, the springs have benefitted him remarkably. Even so, he bumbles around his partner, whose proficient footwork has the unfortunate effect of emphasising the earl’s clumsiness. Where the boy jetés, Lord Brauer stumbles. The man is a blot - an irritating distraction from the study of perfection. Or as near to it as Hannibal can recall having seen for many a Season.

Almack’s, unlike Quant's, demands of its patrons full and proper attire at all times, and to this rule the boy has adhered stringently. Not a cuff is crooked nor a button missed. From high cravat - starched to severity, framing a face of deceptive innocence - to narrow patent slippers, the boy is a model of fashion in blue and grey.

‘Well? Are we to be kept in suspense all evening?’ Lady Margot’s voice is alight with amusement.

‘I merely wished to point out,’ dragging himself back to the conversation with some effort, ‘that the inclusion of a few less vigorous dances is useful for separating mutton from lamb. One can study individual form much better this way.’

‘Nicely put. Indeed, I see a fair few *lambs* in the present set,’ comments Mason. ‘In fact,’ and here his voice takes on a distinctly lascivious tone, ‘I spy one in particular whom I believe could freshen up the most flaccid of mutton.’

It is hardly necessary to guess to whom Mason is referring, or why; subtlety is not the viscount’s strong suit. Hannibal turns from the lines of dancers, who twirl and flirt like butterflies.

‘Lady Margot, would you do me the honour of dancing the next with me? I had quite decided against dancing tonight, but Lady Prurnell has been shooting at me the blackest of looks. I suppose that I had better make some sort of effort before she rescinds my voucher.’

‘Gracious, you must indeed!’ says Margot with a giggle, and curtsies. ‘I would be honoured, sir.’

‘One must wonder, Lecter,’ comments Mason in a tone laden with mischief, ‘why you do not wait to ask yonder young lamb.’

‘Which young lamb is this?’ Margot surveys the assembly with rapt curiosity. ‘Oh, I say. Not the pretty boy who looks as if he should be frolicking in one of Signor Botticelli’s paintings?’

‘You have no idea,’ sniggers Mason.

‘You do not mean -’ Margot’s hand flies to her mouth. ‘He is the one you were telling me about?’

‘Verger, you are an unmitigated gossip,’ pronounces Hannibal, feigning boredom as he samples his wine again.

‘I?’ His friend’s eyes widen in a parody of innocence. ‘Pray tell, sister, what on Earth did I say to you that you could possibly have construed as hinting at improper conduct?’

‘You mean other than the fact that the count was much engaged three nights since in the enjoyment of *a rather special Quant’s performance by a bewitching boy with midnight-dark curls and a pretty little mouth*? Absolutely nothing, brother.’

‘Truly, Verger, if ever you should find yourself in need of occupation, you should take up the quill. Novel writing would just suit you.’ Hannibal thrusts his glass at Mason and extends his hand to their amused companion. ‘Come, Lady Margot, we shall leave him in his cups.’

The dancers rearrange themselves: some have opted to remain on the floor, clinging avariciously to their previous partners; others, like Hannibal and Margot, venture forth for the first time. The lines reform, this time for a livelier country dance; and as the orchestra strikes up, the usual bows and curtsies are exchanged.

Only when they have performed the first series of steps does Margot comment in low tones, ‘From appearance alone, the boy is quite the confection. I am surprised only that you did not sample him for yourself.’

‘The opportunity did not avail itself, although,’ admits Hannibal, ‘it did cross my mind to try him.’

‘Given that I have not seen you indulge for these several weeks at least, I should think so!’

‘I believe him to be Sutcliffe’s property.’ The words are sour on his tongue.

‘Baron Sutcliffe has bought himself a pretty chit?’ Margot’s eyes dance with mirth. ‘How uncharacteristically interesting of him. I must say, the lamb whets even my appetite, and you know that I prefer my lovers a trifle older.’

‘A trifle?’ Hannibal cannot keep the levity from his voice. ‘Verger and I have a running bet on the upper threshold of age that we believe you shall one day breach.’

‘You may laugh.’ Primly, Margot executes a flawless turn. ‘But with Papa in high dudgeon over my reluctance to wed, I must be allowed some relief. And young puppies fall in love so terribly easily, you know. One spends forever separating oneself from their clinging limbs.’

They perform the next few figures in the same vein, swapping tart remarks and, occasionally, partners, as they begin a slow progression down the dance. A minor member of royalty is at the top; in second position is a duke with his duchess; in third, a couple of viscounts, who by rights should be

lower than Hannibal. But he is content enough to be fourth in the line: never has Hannibal Lecter bothered to insist upon precedence in anything as trifling as a dance.

‘Now, sir, about your luscious little lamb from Quant's -’

‘Really, Lady Margot, your tenacity grows wearisome.’

Margot’s brows shoot up. ‘Well, then. In that case, I shall say no more.’

Hannibal is congratulating himself on having finally silenced his friend on the subject when they change partners again and he finds himself looking straight into the same sky blue eyes that have, in his last few nightly fantasies, watched him narrowly as he has brought himself to climax. The cupid’s bow mouth is pursed now. In thoughtfulness or petulance? The boy is as sphynx-like as he was three nights since, and suddenly the idea of finally hearing him speak is extremely compelling.

Their gloved hands touch and it is difficult not to think of the sweep of bare fingertips across his neck. Not to say *other* places where he has only imagined them straying. The deuce of it is, they have not been introduced formally, which should matter not a jot after their intimate-by-proxy encounter at Quant's. Yet even as the boy’s supposed social superior, Hannibal is reluctant to exert the privilege of rank and invite conversation. The spell of silence is compelling, and so on they go with the dance, eyes locked.

Quickly, Hannibal finds himself anticipating every move: the placement of his hand on the boy’s waist; the boy’s palm warm on his shoulder; the slight brush of their bodies as they turn this way and that. His young partner is wearing a singular scent: orange blossom with undertones of earthy sweetness. Ambergris? The nature of things being as they are, it was in all probability a gift. The question is, from whom? The puce-faced baron or the witless earl? Or are there yet more admirers whose patronage the boy enjoys? Perhaps Sutliffe loans him out on some sort of barter system.

They take their final turn together. It has been an enjoyable, not to say stimulating, experience, and Hannibal waits for the advent of regret at their parting in the boy’s thus far enigmatic expression. None is forthcoming. Blue eyes acknowledge the ending of the dance with nary a blink: it is like staring into a millpond sea. And in the next moment, the boy turns and walks away.

Returning to Margot’s side as the boy is reclaimed by the perspiring earl, Hannibal experiences a twinge of pique. Not a single attempt had been made by the little snip to converse with him; not the least suggestiveness of gesture had been let slip. Such a show of modesty in one who has so recently demonstrated his ease at the flaunting of convention in a public setting is irksome. Granted, this is not the Top Room at Quant's, but either the boy is a consummate actor or his parting gesture the other night was mockery rather than encouragement. *That* notion does not sit well, and throughout the next dance Hannibal’s mood darkens still further. At its end he is in no humour for a quadrille, and gladly he relinquishes Margot’s hand to a mutual acquaintance. A change of scene, he decides, is required. And thus Hannibal leaves the societal menagerie for an adjacent gaming room.

This chamber is small, dark, smelling of old money and worn leather. There is an honesty to it that appeals. Desperate men look the part, and those who are here merely to *play* at playing provide an occasional interlude of laughter. Of course the ballroom, too, has its share of desperation: mothers haggle for filial suitors with promises of five-course dinners and evenings at whist; second-born sons hunt for prospective partners who can promise wealth and stability; first-born sons watch their fathers with resentful eyes, wondering when it will be *their* time. But that matrimonial hunting ground holds limited appeal for someone who is determined never to wed: Count Hannibal Lecter VIII, for whom title and independence came all too soon…

Introspection is all very well; action is better. Spotting a couple of close acquaintances just sitting down at one of the velvet-lined tables, Hannibal acknowledges their calls for him to join them in a game of commerce. An hour or two of cards and scintillating conversation will soon set him to rights.

***

Winning certainly helps, even if the sums paid over are vastly lower than those flaunted in his usual gambling haunts. The candles are waning when Hannibal bids his fellow players goodnight, promising to call on the Lords Price in Mayfair before his departure for Derbyshire, and exhorting them to pay him a visit at Lecter House before the summer is out.

His final undertaking is to seek out Mason and Margot in order to confirm their attendance at Lecter House at the end of the following week.

‘As if we would miss your birthday,’ exclaims Margot. ‘Chilton and I have been corresponding for months over the particulars of the ball.’

‘It was meant to be a modest party.’ Hannibal levels at his friend a severe look. ‘What have you been scheming?’

‘Put it out of your mind, Lecter,’ advises Mason with a wink. ‘You shall enjoy yourself and that is all that you need to know.’

‘Trust Chilton if not us,’ says Margot, placidity personified. ‘Not for the world would he allow you to be discomfited.’

‘I am aware of the many virtues of my butler, thank you, Lady Margot. Very well, then,’ he sighs. ‘You may continue uninterfered with.’

The matter settled, adieus over, he leaves behind the revellers in search of hat and cane. An odd noise is wafting out of an adjacent room; the door is slightly ajar, and Hannibal stops to listen. It sounds very much like choking. One of the more inebriated patrons, perhaps, too deep in his cups. He is debating whether to knock when a muffled sound flavoured with urgency issues forth. It is enough to prompt genuine concern, and so without further debate he pushes open the door and steps inside.

The small anteroom is possessed only of an armchair and a Chesterfield. The former is empty. The latter creaks in protest beneath the weight of its two occupants. One, Lord Brauer, lies on his back, fingers scrabbling for purchase on the studded green leather. The other, younger and infinitely more graceful, sits astride the earl, knees digging into the seat on either side. His hands are pressed firmly against the earl’s mouth. Well, that explains the muffling. At first sight, both appear to be fully clothed. Hannibal looks more closely. The earl’s breeches front fall is open, and his very excited cock is being rubbed mercilessly between the rider’s slim thighs. Thighs which, at Quant's, had been covered by an overlong shirt. This time, tight breeches outline clearly the boy’s hardness. With each undulation, he ruts down, drawing more stifled noises from the earl.

‘Shh.’

It is not precisely a word, of course, but it is the first sound that Hannibal has heard the boy make, and it startles out of him an indrawn breath. Lord Brauer’s eyes are squeezed tightly shut and he is making urgent little ‘mph’ noises - he has not been alerted by Hannibal’s lapse.

But the boy - the boy is a different matter indeed. He turns his head on a slow swivel, and fixes Hannibal with a look very far from either surprise or embarrassment. If pressed, Hannibal would say

that it borders on insolence. Without breaking eye contact, the boy increases his downward rocking, and when with a pained whine the earl comes, dribbling white, the boy has the impudence to flash at Hannibal a smug grin.

It is impossible to deny that this firebrand of a man-child, with his apparent predilection for semi-public sex, is as arousing as he is outrageous. But this is the second time that Hannibal has witnessed the singular beauty's lavishment of attentions on decidedly inferior recipients, and his own stubborn continued interest disgusts him. Jaw clenching, he tears his gaze away, turns abruptly and leaves the room, closing the door quietly behind him.

***

The following evening, Hannibal eschews a final visit to Quant's, spending it instead in determined solitude with a book.

The book is extremely dull.

The evening afterwards, his last in the capital, Hannibal sets out for Covent Garden. It is, to all intents and purposes, the final night of the Season; and even at seven o'clock in the evening, the West End of London spills over with excited patrons eager to snare one final thrill.

The Marriage of Figaro at the Theatre Royal seems to be the intended destination for the entire ton, and more than once the possibility has crossed Hannibal's mind that a certain blue-eyed siren might be in attendance. No matter. This uncharacteristic dwelling on one subject is merely a sign that he has been neglectful of his baser needs. Once he is home again in Derbyshire, he will take care to correct that situation. There are stable boys enough on the estate, and each of them knows better than to expect a commitment lasting longer than an orgasm.

Hannibal joins the stream of patrons passing beneath the theatre's central portico, between fluted columns of white. Unwilling to linger in the vestibule, he walks through quickly and mounts the grand staircase, at the top of which is the saloon. This elegant space, flanked by statuary, provides velvet-lined seats of carved stone for those gathering to assemble in the boxes. Here, servants offer refreshments, and Hannibal accepts a glass of wine as the door to his usual box is opened.

From his first visit at the age of one-and-twenty he has favoured this spot, perched high at the back of the auditorium, on the topmost of five tiers. Hannibal does not care so much for the actors as for the music they produce; and here, sound soars. Settling back in his seat, he brings the goblet to his lips and enjoys both the first sweet taste of currant and the vivacious audacity of the overture's opening notes.

As Figaro and Susannah begin their amicable bickering, Hannibal lifts his opera glasses and surveys his near neighbours. Many are recognisable from the Almack's crowd, although he knows that tonight he will not count Mason and Margot among them, for a long-standing invitation with a beloved aunt keeps them in Mayfair.

Most of the boxes are full, each one a lavishly ornamented cage for the most privileged of the ton. A few, like Hannibal's, are more sparsely occupied, for those with the preference - and the means - to secure exclusivity. One such is Lord Sutcliffe, sitting directly opposite, looking decidedly more presentable than he had at Quant's.

And he is not alone.

Capturing the count

Count Hannibal Lecter VIII is glowering. He presents a formidable picture: high-cut coat tailored in severe lines, the blue shot through with gold; tall and straight of carriage; chestnut hair sleek and gleaming; full lips curled now in dissatisfaction or contempt. Probably more likely the latter. *Dear, dear*.

Will chews on his lip, trying to decide whether or not to feel annoyed. It does seem rather unfair that this contempt is being leveled at *him*. After all, it is not as if he has been deliberately throwing himself

in the count's autocratic path. If anything, it seems to have been the other way around. He settles on a show of mild irritation and, with a toss of his head, returns his attention to the stage.

A hot palm lands on his thigh. It is damp and will undoubtedly leave a visible stain. But then the baron does have a penchant for marking his territory.

'I cannot abide these seats,' grumbles Sutcliffe. 'They are too high and offer no privacy.'

'Poor Donald.' Will turns and flutters his eyelashes in the ridiculously over the top way that he knows his lover enjoys. 'You mean, I suppose, that I cannot suck your cock in front of all these people.'

It is a terrible shame that red cheeks do not suit the baron: he wears them incessantly.

'For that bit of insolence, I shall have you on your knees later on, boy.'

The threat is doubtless meant to be arousing. Will feels only a sense of dragging inevitability. For a while, the delights of Sutcliffe's pocket book had made up for the deficiencies of his character. But two months of devoting most of his energies to one person has proven to be quite enough. It is almost time to throw this one back. Not, however, with the intention of climbing again into the Earl of Brauer's lap - *that* buffoon was barely tolerable for one evening. A pity, as such a union would have created all sorts of promising possibilities for casting embarrassment in a certain direction. But there are limits even to Will's spite. No, it is time to begin fashioning a new lure. Perhaps one tied in threads of shimmering gold...

'I can hardly wait,' he murmurs, distracted. The count's eyes are upon him still - he recalls their unique hues, amber flecked with gold - and he wonders whether their owner's scowl is still in place. But looking again so soon would spoil the fun.

The first act ends and a general stirring commences. To Will's annoyance, Sutcliffe decides to be served drinks in the box. The several scintillating scenarios which Will has been playing out in his head, all of which involve the handsome count and a deal of obnoxious flirting, disappear in a puff of a disappointed sigh. It is more irksome still when he observes covertly the count leaving *his* box without so much as a glance backward.

***

Throughout the second and third acts, Sutcliffe grows more the worse for drink and less amenable. Despite the ease with which other patrons could, if they chose, see into the box, Will has to evade more than one grab for his groin.

'Cease, sir,' he hisses after the third such attempt, 'or I shall insist that your man takes me home.'

'You would not dare,' slurs Sutcliffe, in a pitiful facsimile of authoritarianism. 'You warm my bed. You do not instruct my servants. That is *my* province.'

'Then I suggest that you instruct *yourself* into some semblance of control.'

The baron's voice grows surly. 'I do not care for this volte face, William. It is usually *I* reprimanding *you* for your wandering hands. Do you admit now to owning some prudish blood? Or have I managed at last to sate your appetites?'

It is all that Will can do to keep his countenance. The day Sutcliffe manages to make Will come without the aid of his own hand and some fertile imaginings will be cause for celebration indeed. But for the moment, maintaining the status quo is necessary.

‘No, indeed, my lord. For how could I ever tire of one so… vigorous as you?’ Voice tuned to appeasement, Will adds with studied hesitancy, ‘I am aware, however, of a rumour concerning the Prince Regent - that he might make a sudden appearance tonight. You know how he loves his surprises. And it surely would not do to risk offending his royal person.’

This effortless series of lies is apparently enough; for Sutcliffe grunts, settles again, and returns to his wine. Will draws his own chair back enough that he is no longer so easy a target, and his gaze flickers to the box opposite. From the superciliousness of the count’s expression, he has witnessed the entire pantomime - and whatever conclusions he has drawn from it appear have amused him greatly.

What would it take to erase that complacency? What might Will do to have the count whining for him?

More than can be accomplished beneath the bright lights of a packed theatre, more is the pity. A thought occurs. Will leans in again to whisper.

‘Would you mind excusing me, my lord? I fear that I took too much wine before we came out.’

He is waved away, and directs a single smirking challenge across the auditorium before he turns and leaves the box.

The soprano’s plaintive aria follows him, echoing down the empty staircase, growing faint as he reaches the vestibule.

Outside, Bow Street is quiet, but for the hum of gas lamps that cast smudged halos against an indigo sky. Opposite the templed grace of the theatre there is a shabby alley, and towards it Will saunters. As an experiment, this may prove to be a waste of time - although he could, of course, take the opportunity to actually relieve himself. But even if his intuition about the count and all of those brooding stares proves false, the temporary solitude is welcome.

He’s halfway across the street when a second set of footsteps joins his own in tantalising counter-melody. Unhurried yet purposeful. Will keeps walking but slows his steps as he enters the empty alley, taking care not to venture in too far. With every passing moment, the clip of boots on dusty flagstones grows louder. Will stops, grins, chews his lip, waits in almost squirming anticipation. Gods but he’s ravenous for a taste of that arrogant…

‘I had thought you to be kept on a leash tonight, but I see that you are capable of independent motion after all.’

Will snorts in derision and turns to face his pursuer, fingers moving to play with one of his breeches buttons. The count’s voice is richly accented and deeper than his boyish looks had suggested. It ripples across Will’s skin like a caress.

‘You should have deduced when you walked in on me and my friend at Almack’s that I do not care for leashes.’ He traces around and around the raised curve of the button.

The count’s eyes flare with dark light. ‘I warrant the baron has no notion of the antics which you and your *friend* were getting up to.’

‘Why should he?’ On impulse, Will slips free the button, and satisfaction curls in his belly as he watches the count tracking the movement. ‘I have my own pursuits just as he has his.’

‘How sociable of you.’

‘I think so.’

‘And how very understanding of the baron to allow his… companion such leeway.’

‘Companion?’ Will jeers gently.

The count’s eyes harden to points of penetrating amber. ‘Would you prefer some other term? Perhaps the one used commonly in saloons, when gentlemen are loose-tongued from drink?’

‘Why not?’ shrugs Will. ‘I care nothing for that. It is just a word, after all.’

‘Is it?’ The count looks back at him, cool, inscrutable. ‘Do you like it, then? Being called his plaything, his possession, his… ladybird?’

Just a word, yet rolled off the count’s tongue it shivers through Will.

‘I am not his possession, and if I am his plaything then such is his reward.’ His chin juts upward. ‘He values me.’

‘Yet here you are all alone, little ladybird.’

Will’s fingers move to the second button, his eyes never leaving the count’s face. Shadows delineate every line, and the artist in him itches to trace them. His voice tips into playfulness. ‘I am not alone. I am with you, Count Lecter.’

The count folds his arms across his chest. ‘You have the advantage of me. I could swear that we have not been formally introduced.’

How wonderfully haughty he sounds. Will flutters his lashes in a parody of coyness. ‘But we have danced, and what more intimate introduction could there be?’

‘Oh, I can think of several.’

Neither of them moves. Is this stalemate? Aware that soon he will be missed and given chase by Sutcliffe’s meddlesome manservant, Will decides to nudge things along.

‘Tell me, my lord. Have you ventured out here to decorate the wall with your own piss or to watch me mark it with mine?’

The count’s mouth twitches. ‘You are a vulgar thing.’

‘I am as you see.’ And with a teasing pout, he releases the second button. ‘Well?’

‘I followed you because I was curious.’

‘About what?’

Being the sole focus of that stern regard is intoxicating, all the more so for there being no other distraction. Will has not yet allowed his breeches front fall to drop - that will depend upon the next few minutes. But the anticipation is increasingly sweet.

The count cocks his head. ‘Your intention in summoning me.’

It seems churlish to deny it. ‘Perhaps *I* was curious about *you*.’ Will allows a few seconds to pass before adding casually, ‘Or perhaps I was merely tired of listening to overwrought duets and sought

alternative amusement.'

'Hm. Curious about what, exactly?'

There is something terribly compelling about this confident dismissal of Will's intended slight. Suddenly, the idle fantasies that he has been mentally sketching burst forth in vivid hues of possibility.

'When you were watching me - at Quant's, at Almack's - was it my hands or my mouth that you most lusted after?'

There it is again - a flash of molten amber. 'Perhaps both. Or neither. Perhaps your cock.'

Oh, that is unexpected. Will's reply is shamelessly breathless. 'Now who is being vulgar?'

'I am merely adapting to the company I am keeping.'

'How convenient.' Will wants to touch himself, to close his eyes and imagine that it is the count's long fingers strumming his hardening flesh, but he holds the impulse in check. Barely. 'And where exactly did you envisage this pleasant encounter taking place?'

'Does it matter, little ladybird?'

There is a sting of contempt in the words that should offend, but Will only grins.

'Not necessarily, although a large bed has its advantages.'

'A bed?' There is now no concealing the mocking tone. 'How very ordinary of you.'

Will slips one hand inside his breeches and gives himself a rough squeeze, uncaring of how much he is giving away. Although perhaps the count will think it the idea of the risque behaviour in itself that has the tip of Will's cock smearing wet, and not the graphic imagining of sheathing himself inside this arrogant man as he writhes back onto the social inferior who has reduced him to commonality, panting on hands and knees in the mud.

Will has contrived breathlessness before - and fascination and sexual desire. But feeling them truly and all at once, in this dingy setting, is throwing him off balance.

'Then where? Tell me and perhaps I might consider it.'

A half step closer and the count's breath is warm on his cheek. They both look down at Will's hand, moving in slow pulls.

'I might be inclined to say here and now. But first, show yourself to me. Prove that you are worth the having.'

Oh, but that husky command is deliciously naughty, and Will is toying with the idea of obeying without demur or cover of humour when a ringing call shatters the moment most admirably.

'Mr Graham? Sir? Sir?'

Will bites back a curse, withdraws his hand, and moves swiftly to rebutton his breeches. The friction of silk against his swollen cock causes him to grit his teeth.

'Is that fellow calling for you, by any chance?'

How annoyingly collected the count sounds as he steps back while Will fumbles, flustered and furious.

‘It is - damnation - it is Fell, the baron’s man.’

Damn Sutcliffe and damn his obsequious, interfering servant. Will hastens forward, only to be halted by a firm grip on his upper arm. He glares up at the count, who sets a finger against Will’s lips. The absurd urge to press his mouth to it sees him jerk back instead. But in the next moment, the count is striding past him out into the street.

‘You there. You might wish to lower your voice, lest you are mistaken for a member of the theatrical company.’

Will peeps from around the wall of the alley against which he has flattened himself. Never before has he seen the blustering Fell turn white.

‘Count Lecter! I did not see you. A thousand apologies for my crass behaviour.’

It is no surprise that Fell knows the count on sight. For who in their world would not recognise instantly one of the foremost aristocrats in the country? Up until a few days ago, he had been to Will just another remote figure of authority - at the top of the pile, admittedly, but still one of the pampered, entitled ton. An austere beauty cloaked in privilege. Until, one humid evening in the Top Room at Quant’s, Will’s covetous gaze had actually been returned, and the cloak had slipped to reveal a man very much of flesh and blood.

Fell is still babbling. ‘I had no idea, you see, of there being anyone else outside.’

‘Yes, yes. Very well.’ No trace remains of the seductive suggestiveness that had curled Will’s toes in his evening slippers. The count is all business, brow lowered forbiddingly. ‘Tell me who it is that you seek with such confounded urgency.’

‘Mr William Graham, my lord,’ stammers the beleaguered servant. ‘My master, Lord Sutcliffe, wishes to ascertain his whereabouts. Mr Graham is - under his protection.’

That is quite the euphemism. From his concealed vantage point, Will smirks.

It is really quite amusing how, without the slightest hesitation, the count assumes the role of acquaintance.

‘I was conversing with Mr Graham not five minutes since. You may inform the baron that his... friend... is quite safe, and is merely relieving himself as all gentlemen are apt to do from time to time. Assure Lord Sutcliffe that he shall not be left bereft for much longer.’

‘I would, but you see, my master…’

Fell should know better than to argue with one so far above his station, but returning without his quarry will trigger unpleasant consequences. As irritating as he is, he has done nothing tonight to be deserving of the baron’s wrath. The situation is rapidly becoming an inconvenience, and Will finds his good humour evaporating. He pushes away from the wall with an aggrieved sigh and emerges from the darkness.

‘For pity’s sake, Fell. Cannot I be allowed to piss in peace?’

The count's eyes are intent on Will as he stalks across the road. But the moment - or whatever it was that had shimmered between them - is gone. Fanciful games are all very well, but Will has no intention of losing his current comfortable situation until he has another one in his sights. Perhaps he might have tried his hand with Count Lecter, were it not the tattle of the town that this is to be his last evening in London. No, Will will resign himself to a lengthy lecture about having left the theatre instead of finding a convenient pot, and will dutifully make amends in all the dirty little ways that the baron likes. Ignoring the count, he gestures curtly to Fell.

'Go on, then. Lead the way.'

The fun is over.

***

A half-decent fucking when they return home proves to be no more than a temporary distraction - and infuriatingly, it is not Sutcliffe's voice that he hears growling in his ear as he is pressed into the bed.

Will's discontent stretches on into the following morning, and he endures the baron's inane observations over breakfast with barely-concealed boredom. Really, the man is far better suited to sex than conversation, although even that novelty is waning - but Will does pluck out one piece of useful information. Sutcliffe will be out for the entire day, choosing a new carriage for their imminent journey to Leicester and his country estate. Will has no wish to leave the capital, but the London house is to be closed up. So to Leicester and Sutcliffe Hall he will go, and make the best of it. If it is necessary to endure the baron's company until Parliament is recalled and society flocks back to town, then so be it.

Once the baron has departed, and he is alone, Will wanders through to the drawing room and takes up his sketchpad. Soon he is absorbed in the susurrus of charcoal sweeping over thickly-grained paper, and his lips curve upward as his subject takes shape. But these pockets of solitude are rare, and it is with cultivated forbearance that he greets the butler's announcement of a caller, just after midday. He sets aside his work and stands to receive the visitor, assuming an attitude of polite apology, for it is presumably the baron whom they have come to see.

His first thought upon the announcement of Lady Margot Verger is that she has arrived at the wrong door. The house is situated respectably in Mayfair, and amongst the residents of this quiet street are counted two viscounts, an earl, and a marquess. Any one of them would be a more likely acquaintance than Sutcliffe for one of the ton's most darling members. Yet in she glides, eyes smiling a shade of green that matches exactly her silk pelisse and feathered bonnet, looking at Will as if gleeful at having found a prize.

'Good day, Mr Graham. I hope that you do not mind the intrusion.'

'It is an honour, not an intrusion, to receive Lady Margot Verger.'

No matter that they have, before today, never exchanged two words. Will exists on the fringe of good society, drawn into its centre now and then by seductive threads that tether him for a while, until disillusion frays and unspools him again. But fine ladies and gentlemen may choose to bestow their favours where they will, and so Will bows and smiles.

'Would you care to sit down?'

'I would, very much.' Her returning smile is natural, with the slightest hint of mischief. 'Is Lord Sutcliffe at home?'

‘Not at present, Lady Margot.’ Although instinct tells him that she is definitively *not* here to see the baron, Will errs on the side of caution. ‘Do you have a message that I might relay to him?’

‘Well, now, that I do not know. Not quite yet.’

Mulling over this enigmatic reply, Will rings for tea. The ritual that follows is conducted in polite silence, broken only by the butler’s enquiries to determine the amounts of cream and sugar to be added to Lady Margot’s cup. The morose Buddish conducts this ceremony with the same solemnity that he employs in every other area of his work; Will has met few individuals as cheerless. Thankfully, having fulfilled his duty, Buddish does not linger.

‘Is this your first Season?’ enquires Lady Margot, stirring her tea with a delicate touch. ‘I do not recall seeing you out last year.’

‘It is my first,’ he confirms, adding a swirl of cream to his tea. Buddish seems to take great delight in withholding this particular pleasure from his master’s lover. ‘I came up to town in December.’

‘With your family?’

‘No.’ To soften the clipped response, he adds, ‘My parents reside in Bath. They do not care for the capital.’

Half-truths are surely better than outright falsehoods. Will hopes that this one will satisfy.

‘How very modern of them to allow you to spread your wings alone.’ Lady Margot regards him with curiosity but thankfully does not pursue the topic. ‘And how have you found London?’

Will samples the tea, savouring sweetened herbal freshness, and hums in thought. ‘Educational.’

If his visitor detects the satirical note, she is evidently too polite to pass comment. ‘Every young person should be in receipt of an education, whether formal or informal.’

‘I quite agree.’

‘And which philosophy do you adhere to, Mr Graham? The formal or informal?’

‘Very much the latter.’

Precisely how many wastrels of noble birth occupy coveted places at Oxford and Cambridge, Will has no idea. But he has seen and heard enough to know that precious few come away from the experience with anything more useful than a beribboned scroll.

‘Then you are an advocate of the Grand Tour?’

‘For those with such means, I am sure that it has a good deal to offer. Yet there is also much to be learned from simply looking around, would not you say?’

Lady Margot is observing him with the most curious gleam in her green eyes. ‘I will say... that you are quite the surprise, Mr Graham.’

This verbal dance has been pleasant enough but the reason for it has, Will decides, remained elusive for long enough. He sets down his cup.

‘Is there something that I can help you with, Lady Margot?’

‘Why? Do you have pressing matters to attend to?’

There is no malice in her tone but the message is clear: I know what your role here is. And that suits Will very well. Far better for it to be understood that this is an arrangement of convenience. The idea that anyone should imagine him to have taken up with Sutcliffe out of any notion of romance is frankly appalling.

‘Not at all, but I would think that you have many calls on *your* time.’

‘Probably not as many as you imagine, and very few at the close of the Season.’ Indeed, Lady Margot appears perfectly at ease, sipping daintily from fine china (which would, in Will’s opinion, benefit from a deal fewer painted flower petals). ‘In truth, I prefer to spend my mornings drawing rather than paying calls. I see that it is an enjoyment which we share.’

Will’s glance slides to the abandoned sketchpad, and his cheeks bloom at the realisation that it lies open at rather an incriminating page. But perhaps his visitor will not recognise the rough profile.

‘I must say, that is an exceptional likeness of dear Lecter.’

It was, he supposes, a forlorn hope. For even among all the paraded lovelies of the ton, what other face could hope to be possessed of such sculptured refinement? No matter. Better to brazen it out.

‘I enjoy beauty in all its forms, Lady Margot. And society soirées provide excellent source material.’

‘Indeed.’ Lady Margot sets aside her cup and takes up the pad, while Will battles with the urge to snatch it back. ‘Yet you should not undersell your talent. You have succeeded in capturing the count better than many who have been hired for such a purpose.’

The praise is uncomfortable against his skin. He leans forward across the low table and gently disengages the sketchpad from its admirer.

‘You are too generous, Lady Margot.’

‘Not as a rule.’ Her tone is contemplative. ‘Tell me, Mr Graham. How attached are you to your present... position? I am of a mind, you see, to engage you for a project that would require your sole focus for some considerable time.’

‘You wish to employ me?’

‘That is correct.’

Will’s brow crinkles. ‘As a portraitist?’

‘Not exactly.’

Lady Margot’s grin is wickedness itself.

Dangerous conceits

There are few pursuits as exhilarating as riding across mile after mile of open ground on the back of a hunter thoroughbred, and returning from the third such outing in as many days has put Hannibal in an excellent humour. An early meeting with his steward has confirmed that the finances of this and the several other of his inherited estates are in the best of health; the newly-finished North Wing has more than passed inspection; and they have just secured the services of a talented young horticulturist to take over management of the gardens here at Lecter House.

Hannibal celebrates his varied good fortune by fucking his favourite stable hand, a welcome release for weeks of pent up energy, and only slightly spoiled by the ridiculous chirping noises that the boy, Fred, insists on making as he fairly climbs Hannibal in his enthusiasm. He is all freckles and teeth, and has still no idea of how to kiss. On the edge of climax, Hannibal thinks of blue eyes scowling up at him through a mess of black curls. He pulls out and comes hard all over the stable hand's filthy breeches.

***

A swim in the lake later, Hannibal returns to the house, damp and invigorated and still humming with restless energy that nothing seems able to satiate. Chilton tuts and fusses, and brings him hot negus in the drawing room.

'A message has arrived from the Hydes, my lord. That makes the last of the acceptances.'

'Any refusals?'

'Certainly not.'

Hannibal chuckles at his butler's affronted tone. 'Well, then. I suppose that we had better get on and open up the Painted Hall.'

'It is already in hand, my lord.'

'Of course it is. I can always rely on you, Chilton.'

Indeed, when after luncheon he conducts an inspection of the house with the head housekeeper, Hannibal cannot but be impressed. Surfaces gleam, chandeliers sparkle, and clouds of white roses fill every nook.

'The party is not for another two days,' he reminds her. 'Will they last?'

'My lord.' The housekeeper bestows on him a look of gentle reproach, one which contains echoes of years past. 'They will then be at their most brilliant, and their perfume will have spread throughout the house. Your mother, as you know, had a fondness for roses, and she was kind enough to instruct me in their care.'

Hannibal's smile grows tight. 'Yes, thank you, Mrs Nichols.' And abruptly he changes the subject.

***

Despite Hannibal's previous protestations against a lavish party, he has to admit as he gazes down from a corner of the mezzanine balcony on the assembled crowd in the Painted Hall - so named for the lavish murals plastered across its walls and ceiling, depictions of byegone glories - that it was for nights such as this that the house had been built, some two hundred and fifty years since. All is shimmer and light, the theme of black and white offering a perfect foil for the jewelled masks that have been declared de rigueur for the event by Margot.

It had seemed almost hourly that some new directive or other had arrived from Boarham Hall over the past few days, until finally Hannibal had given Chilton and Mrs Nichols free rein to follow or ignore his persistent friend's wishes as they liked. They had firmly rejected the idea of white doves being released in synchronised fashion throughout the six rooms which had been fitted up to serve supper, but had offered the consolation of half a dozen caged songbirds in their stead.

On the mezzanine, the orchestra strikes up an elegaic piece by Handel, and the guests form themselves into lines across the length of the black and white chequered marble floor. Having opened the dancing, and remained on the floor for five successive sets, Hannibal considers his duty well and truly done - at least until supper is called in another hour or so.

Despite the pantomime of masked anonymity, it is not difficult to ascertain who is who, and he raises a hand in greeting to Margot and Mason, who are standing by the fireplace with their parents, looking about as uncomfortable as Hannibal would expect. The Earl and Countess of Boarham are not renowned for either their conversational or parenting skills; it is fitting that their plain white masks are lacking wholly in imagination. Margot, expression hidden behind a bejewelled Death's-head hawkmoth, conveys with a succinct hand gesture her disgust at being so restrained, and Hannibal is still laughing when his eye is caught by an elfin figure in a *red* high-cut coat and black breeches, sneaking up the oak staircase on the far side of the hall. A boy, with a tumble of black curls threaded through with a thick ribbon that is attached to his mask. From this angle, Hannibal cannot make out its exact design, but from the extravagant plumage it would appear to be a bird of some description.

He watches until the boy has disappeared from view, and his eyes narrow in thought. That particular staircase curves upward to the library and music parlour, and from thence into the private dining room and his new wing, all of which are, tonight, out of bounds. Even so, there are servants enough on all sides of the house to ensure that the young miscreant will be turned around before he can cause any mischief. There is no need for the master of the house to concern himself at all…

Passing a mirror, Hannibal checks that his own mask, antlered and black as night, is secure. This emblem of the Lecter family has been passed down through seven generations; the buck keeps watch over the house and its occupants from cornices, tapestries and sculpted chandeliers.

It is an easy matter in this house to pass from one wing to another through ways sometimes hidden but always convenient to the master; the Sixth Count had a predilection for installing multiple lovers, and an equal determination to avoid domestic hostilities by keeping them entirely separate from one another. So it is that Hannibal is able to pass quickly along the gallery that hugs the wall, and thus avoid the delays that would surely befall him should he attempt to cross the main floor.

When at length he slips silently into the dining room, he finds the interloper still within. There is little of stealth now in the boy's movements; confident, presumably, in his solitude, he wanders across to the first in a line of windows that overlook the sloping lawn. His hands come to rest on the sill, fingers playing with the catch.

'If you are thinking of leaving that way, I would not recommend it. The drop is more severe than it looks.' Upon the boy's quick turn, Hannibal adds acidly, 'I must say, you are a long way from London, Mr Graham. Are you, by any chance, lost?'

And then Hannibal sees exactly what the mask is, and he wants to shout with laughter at the unmitigated cheek of the boy. Not feathers but feelers; it is the head of a *ladybird*, of all things. Beneath its enormous inky eyes, red lips pout in studied insouciance.

'Not at all, my lord, I assure you.'

Hannibal stalks closer.

'Then you are in a deal of trouble. All other considerations apart, these are my private rooms.'

The boy actually *shrugs*. 'Are you afraid that I will make off with the silver - or with one of your delectable footmen?'

‘Who is to say?’ snaps Hannibal, ‘I can easily believe you capable of either. What are you about, Mr Graham, trespassing on my property? I do not recall having invited Lord Sutcliffe to my party.’

‘Whether you did or not is no concern of mine.’ Rather than backing away, the boy closes the gap between them until they are standing together as close as they had been in that dark, dank alley a week since. ‘I am not here with him - or for him.’ A tongue tip peeks out to touch the bow of his upper lip. ‘Or for the silver.’

Hannibal is suddenly raw with want. Orange blossom perfume and the faint scent of leather tease his senses as long-lashed eyes gaze up at him in lustful invitation. And what is to prevent him from taking what is being offered? All that he need do is close the doors at either end of the room - no one would dare disturb them. He reaches out and flicks one of the ridiculous black feelers that sprout from the top of the sequinned mask.

‘Are you propositioning me, little ladybird?’

‘Do you want me to?’

That pink tongue tip is peeping out again. Hannibal wants to lean in and suck it into his own mouth. But…

‘I am no more a thief than you are. I do not,’ he emphasises firmly, ‘take what belongs to others.’

That earns him a scornful head toss. ‘I belong to myself alone, my lord. Everything else is negotiation.’

Interesting. ‘Did you come here to seduce me or to be seduced by me?’

The quick jerk of narrow shoulders is becoming familiar. ‘Which answer will end with you fucking me?’

The sheer nerve of the boy is breathtaking. Admittedly, it is also flattering. That young Mr Graham should have been so enamoured as to have chased Hannibal halfway across the country… He cannot stay, of course, but Hannibal will make sure that he goes back to London with fifty pounds in his pocket and a satisfied smile on his cherubic face.

Of course, it would not do to make it *too* easy for him.

‘I have near enough one hundred guests downstairs,’ Hannibal reminds him sternly.

‘Who are all busy entertaining each other and therefore shall not miss their host for an hour.’ The boy’s voice takes on a wheedling tone. ‘Come, my lord. Take me somewhere and fuck me. I have wanted you since that first night at Quant’s. Do not you want me?’

Salacious murmurings taunt Hannibal’s memory.

‘Was it my hands or my mouth that you most lusted after?’
‘Show yourself to me.’

That. He wants that first. He wants it *now*. To see the boy in all his pale-skinned beauty.

And with a shuddering breath, Hannibal gives in.

‘You want me to fuck you?’ He pulls out one of the dining chairs and turns it around. He sits down and leans back, with every appearance of relaxation. But desire is running thick through his veins as he readies himself for the private audience that he has craved since Quant’s. ‘Then here shall have to suffice. Shut the doors.’

Pulsing arousal notwithstanding, it is amusing to watch the boy veritably skip from one side of the long room to the other, pulling closed each set of double doors with dramatic emphasis.

‘Now come here, William.’

The boy’s cheeks pinken. Strange that the utterance of his given name should embarrass the little wanton. He pivots and dances across to stand before Hannibal.

‘Will,’ he corrects stoutly, poised as if for defiance.

‘Will,’ repeats Hannibal. The shape and softness of the syllable is pleasing. ‘Show me what you have that would induce me to stay away from my own party.’

With a satisfied hum, and an unselfconscious ease that comes presumably from long practice, *Will* proceeds to unbutton first his coat and then the black waistcoat that lies beneath, shucking them off together. It is a large room, and with the fire unlit there is a distinct chill. The boy’s nipples are shadowed peaks against the thin material of his white shirt. Hannibal grasps his slender waist, pulling the boy to stand between his parted thighs.

‘Do you like being touched, Will? Like this?’ Drawing the backs of his fingers across one small nub. It is pleasingly hard and tight.

‘Yes.’ Breathless.

‘Hm. And like this?’

Hannibal leans in and seals his mouth around the perked nipple. He wets it with his tongue and sucks strongly through fine white linen.

‘Mm. Oh, yes. That’s n-nice.’ Ridiculously long lashes feather against the boy’s cheeks. ‘More, please.’

Hannibal grazes an admonishing bite for the show of imperiousness but shifts his attention willingly enough. His fingers snag beneath the shirt hem and he tugs it up, revealing smooth, pale skin over a taut stomach. Higher, then, and he is able finally to kiss and nip at puckered skin. When he raises his head, he gazes for a moment at the two damp, pink little points. He brushes a thumb across one and the boy arches beautifully into his touch. Hannibal’s cock is hard now between his legs, and an unmistakable ridge spoils the line of the boy’s breeches.

All at once, the idea of a drawn-out inspection and slow fucking is intolerable.

It is a simple matter to unfasten first his own front fall, then the boy’s; to delve in and close his fist around warm, taut flesh while simultaneously drawing out his own stiff cock. With a low murmur of encouragement, Will shifts closer so that their groins press together.

‘Oh, fuck, that feels good.’ His eyes flutter closed and his mouth drops open as he rolls his hips, rubbing his smaller cock against Hannibal’s. ‘I want - want you to -’

Hannibal grips the soft curves of the boy's bottom and hoists him up into his lap. 'Shut up,' he growls, wrapping the boy's legs around his waist. 'You will take what is offered and be satisfied.'

There is no grace about what happens next between them: a frantic rutting, the boy keening in Hannibal's lap as he squirms and pants and whines. There is no soft exploration or slow build up: ten days of foreplay have put paid to that. Hannibal's breathing is harsh against the exposed curve of the boy's neck and he groans loudly as he empties himself. Moments later, nails dig into his thighs in warning before Will, too, comes with a series of high little cries that he muffles against Hannibal's shoulder.

Hannibal is not so callous as to tip the boy from his lap the moment the last shudders of completion have subsided, but his hold slackens and he rights himself, the tidying up process an ideal excuse to create a little distance between them.

A handkerchief is barely effective in cleaning them up but it will have to suffice. They are both still masked, although the disguises sit askew. Will hums beneath his breath as he allows Hannibal to tend him - it is the Handel piece which even now resonates faintly through the walls as if in sly accompaniment. How entirely relaxed the boy appears. But then, based on Hannibal's admittedly limited knowledge of him, this scenario is a familiar one.

'Let me see what I can do with this.'

Gruff, and slightly unnerved by the vehemence of the passion which has led to this state of affairs, he attempts to smooth out the worst of the creases in Will's shirt.

'Do not worry.' Will slides from his lap and begins a vigorous tucking-in process. 'My coat will hide the worst of it.'

Hannibal dabs at his inner thigh and grimaces. He would benefit from a bath - they both would - but that is out of the question. The only thing for it is to brazen it out and hope that the general cocktail of aromas in the Painted Hall masks the smell of sex. He has, at least, danced a sufficiency tonight to satisfy even the most querulous of society mothers.

'Very well.' Awkwardness abounds as he stands to refasten his breeches and straighten his clothes. 'We should go down.'

'Back to the party?'

Pouting thing.

'Naturally. As it is being held in honour of my birthday, I am obliged to attend.'

'You did attend. And now everyone is having a good time without you. And you have yet to fuck me.'

Such rudeness would not usually amuse Hannibal so. He wonders at his tolerance of it, while asserting firmly, 'I will not abandon my guests for my own entertainment, no matter how tempting the inducement.'

When the only reaction forthcoming is a stubborn moue, he grasps Will's hand and strides back through the room. The boy's palm is soft against his, and after a momentary hesitation he feels slender fingers curl around his. They pass through the music parlour, and part of Hannibal wants to keep going straight - into the library and through to the doors at its furthest end, doors that lead deeper into the North Wing... and his bedchamber.

Instead, he turns right onto the landing and proceeds down the oak staircase. Enough of self-indulgence. He will set Will loose among his guests and see what occurs. Perhaps, if the boy can restrain himself from fucking anyone else in the meantime, Hannibal might take him into his bed at the end of the night. But the slaking of his immediate thirst has cleared his head a little. Risque behaviour is all very well in the capital - one might almost say that it is expected of a young bachelor worth twenty thousand pounds a year. But this is his home, his birthright - tied to a name of which he is prodigiously proud. Here, more is expected of him. Indeed, here he expects more of himself. He has a legacy to protect and an estate to tend. Here, whoring around simply will not do.

Their return to the Painted Hall coincides with the commencement of a waltz. There is much to-do and a flurry of movement; everyone wishes to make it known that they are excessively shocked by the inclusion of such a daring dance, while all scrambling madly for places in the set.

Hannibal looks about for his friends. Of Margot there is no immediate sign, but he spots Mason partnered further up the set with Lady Bedelia du Maurier, only child of the fearsome Marchioness of Moray. Given that the daughter is more humourless even than her awful mama, it is probably fair to guess that this is a sop to the mother in recompense for Mason's faux pas at Almack's. There are other acquaintances close by - Francis Hyde, dour former classmate at Oxford; Nicholas Boyle, a childhood friend who has long been besotted with Mason - but greeting either of them is an impossibility when bearing down on Hannibal is Mrs Hobbs, a determined local mother of six. Her offspring, ranging in age from seventeen to five-and-twenty, are all as yet unattached, and that makes Mrs Hobbs a dangerous creature indeed.

With only moments to spare, Hannibal pulls Will into his arms and insinuates them smoothly into the circle of dancers. He is met with no resistance other than a quirked eyebrow, and they fall quickly into an easy rhythm.

'Who taught you to dance so well?'

'I taught myself, my lord.'

The pert reply is entirely in keeping. Hannibal shakes his head, amused.

'How foolish of me to think that you might have learned from a master, like any other mortal.'

'Like any other mortal with a fortune to inherit, you mean?' Derision sparks bright in blue eyes.

'Oh, come now. Do you mean to claim poverty for yourself while wearing a waistcoat of the finest French silk?'

But his opponent is unabashed. 'A gift, my lord. From a prodigiously generous friend.'

'Hmph. Do not be so modest. I am sure that you earned it.'

Will bats his eyelashes teasingly. 'Is that flattery disguised as an insult or the other way about?'

Sparring with the boy is almost as enjoyable as partnering him in a waltz. His youthful curves fit perfectly the span of Hannibal's hands; he is as light-footed as Hannibal remembers from their dance at Almack's; and their perfect attunement draws more than one pair of curious eyes. There is perhaps a half foot's difference between them in height, although Hannibal suspects that Will has yet a little more growing to do. He makes a mental note to enquire as to the boy's age.

It seems to be a mere blink later that the gong is sounded for supper; and almost without thinking, Hannibal leaves the floor with Will's hand still held fast within his own. It is the boy's gentle but insistent tugging that brings him to his senses; and just as he is musing over where best to seat his unexpected guest, a signal from Chilton distracts him and Will breaks free, slipping away into the chattering crowd. It is not Hannibal's habit to make chase of a reluctant lover, yet Will's decampment is peculiarly vexing, and it is with a frown etched into his brow that Hannibal makes his way through the throng to where his butler stands beneath the cantilevered staircase.

'Well?'

Snapping at Chilton is another rarity. Ever the consummate professional, the butler slides smoothly into an explanation about the last minute substitution of white soup for vegetable, and pointedly does not ask what has sent his master into a sudden fit of bad temper.

Hannibal nods impatiently. 'Yes, yes. That will be fine.'

Why he should be expected to care is beyond him, but he refrains from commenting as much.

***

Six state rooms have been converted for the purpose of providing every guest with a sit-down dinner; Hannibal does not care for the newest fad of keeping guests on their feet, expecting them to dine while roaming free, like so many grazing sheep. After four or five hours of dancing, even the most hardy person is generally ready to collapse into a chair and spend an hour or two indulging in good food and sweet wine. So it is that the guests are shepherded up the Great Stairs, at the top of which each party is shown through to their assigned room and table, whereupon steaming bowls of white soup are served with alacrity.

Hannibal takes a quick tour of each room, issuing the same general greeting to each set of guests. For the practicality of eating, all masks have been left hanging from the twisted branches of sculpted trees that line the outer corridor. It is easy now to ascertain who is who. There is no sign of Will anywhere, and Hannibal's smile grows tighter with every step. What is the boy about? He recalls a comment about *delectable footmen* and an unpalatable suspicion takes root. By the time he has taken his own seat, between Margot and the Marchioness of Moray, his only wish is to see this part of the night to its end, that he might be free to hunt down the insatiable child and throw him out on his *delectable* rear.

'Are you enjoying the party, my lord?'

Margot's countenance is serene, yet something in her tone alerts Hannibal to the distinct possibility that she has been observing the comings and goings of the last hour.

'Enormously,' he growls, to the evident alarm of the marchioness.

'Dear me, is anything the matter?'

He forces down his irritation and waves his spoon around vaguely. 'Too much onion in the soup, Lady Moray.'

Chilton will never forgive him.

For the sake of his digestion, Hannibal settles to focus on the repast laid out so beautifully before him, and manages to converse quite genially with his near neighbours - even Margot, who is more tiresomely teasing than usual. For seven courses, he maintains every appearance of contentment,

sampling with determined focus the plentiful varieties of fish, game and cheeses that LeBeau, his cook, has spent weeks planning, practising and assembling.

He does *not* think about the saucy boy who is quite possibly running amok in his house after having so disgracefully invaded his home and his person.

Finally the desserts are served: confections of towering jellies, tiered cakes, and a myriad of tiny confections. An image takes shape: of full lips, sugar-dusted, and a pink tongue that flicks out delicately to taste the sweet powder. Do covetous eyes watch him? He is a long way from London and Lord Sutcliffe. Perhaps the two have finally parted ways and the little ladybird is flying free. Is he, even now, being propositioned by some greedy marquess with a thickening cock and even thicker wallet? It is imperative, suddenly, to know exactly what is going on under Hannibal's roof… and without thinking, he rises from the table, fists pressing hard on white damask.

'My lord?' He looks down at the slender hand that has settled on one of his, and then sideways at Margot. She regards him with a quizzical air. 'Are you well?'

'Perfectly, thank you,' he clips. 'I must just see Chilton about the, er -'

'Tart?'

'I beg your pardon?' The growl is back.

With a sweeping gesture, Margot indicates the table. 'There seems to be an absence of LeBeau's famous raspberry tarts. And it is such a shame, for they fill one up in the most satisfying of ways. I wonder where they can have got to.'

Oh, how innocently she blinks up at him.

Suspicion sharpening, Hannibal retorts, 'It is too early for raspberries, Lady Margot, as well you know.' He sinks back into his seat and turns on her the fullness of his attention. 'What are you about?'

'Are you sure that you want to know?' Mason, mouth full of cake, interjects from across the table. His eyes are fairly dancing. 'I told you, Meg. Surprises can be dangerous conceits.'

'Oh, do be quiet, Mason.' Margot directs at Hannibal a saccharine smile. 'I must admit, I have rather a special birthday present for you.' Leaning close, presumably to foil Lady Moray's shameless eavesdropping, Margot whispers, 'As soon as your other guests have departed, I shall present it to you with all due ceremony.'

How successful Margot has been in conveying this information with discretion is debatable, for Lady Moray's eyes have grown as round as saucers, and Mason is sniggering into his port wine.

'I shall not even hazard a guess as to your intentions,' says Hannibal with a resigned sigh, 'but by all means, do as you will.'

Margot responds to this pronouncement with a mischievous smile and returns her attention to her sorbet.

***

As supper draws to a close, the guests begin to make more freely with their movements, some swapping seats to chat gaily with acquaintances while others make their way back downstairs to the

Painted Hall. From the mezzanine of that lofty chamber, music floats: the orchestra is tuning up again, ready for the final set of dances.

Hannibal's thoughts return yet again to the young trespasser who seems to have vanished completely. Perhaps, he thinks dourly, the boy has indeed found himself another willing conquest, and a quiet corner in which to bare himself for their pleasure. With any luck, the sluttish child will eventually wander back of his own free will - at which point, Hannibal shall take great pleasure in telling him exactly what he thinks of such flighty ways before bundling him unceremoniously *out*. Grimly resolute, Hannibal attacks his dessert with unrestrained viciousness.

***

The moon is fading, giving way to the first streaks of red in an indigo sky, when the second to last carriage departs; and the air is tinged with the mingled scents of melting beeswax and blooming roses as Hannibal, mask in hand, strolls back into the house. Of Will Graham there has been no further sign. And although this seeming confirmation of the boy's defection rubs like grit, Hannibal tells himself that it is for the best. His plans for the estate are, in some instances, still in their infancy; distraction here, no matter how desirable, is simply not practical.

He finds Margot and Mason in the library. Their masks, too, have been abandoned as they slump together on the sofa sharing, it seems, some private joke, for they look up at him with identical grins.

'Why do I have the feeling that the pair of you are plotting my downfall?'

'You do talk nonsense sometimes,' rebuts Margot, although she is practically bubbling with barely suppressed mirth. 'Now come and join us. Your present awaits, as does our carriage.'

Hannibal looks about him, at surfaces bare of all but half-empty wine glasses. 'Get on and produce it, then, that I might make the obligatory noises of appreciation and we can all retire.'

When Margot fails to reply, Hannibal turns to her impatiently - and raises his eyebrows at the sight of an envelope, sealed with red wax, dangling from her fingertips.

'A letter?'

'A contract.' The very embodiment of mischief, she oscillates the envelope backwards and forwards.

'A contract? What in heaven's name for?'

As Hannibal's frown deepens, Margot's smile grows wider.

'Well now, when we were all together in the capital, I asked myself what I could possibly acquire for you that you did not possess already.' She taps one fingertip against the luxurious folded parchment. '*What*, I asked myself, *does one get for the count who has everything?* And then, all at once, it came to me.'

'Yes?'

Margot rises, expression serene. 'You will see.' She crosses to the mantelpiece and tugs on the adjacent bell pull to summon Chilton. 'We shall call on you tomorrow evening and you may express your gratitude to me then.'

'You rang, my lord?'

‘Lady Margot and Lord Verger are leaving.’ Wry, Hannibal adds, ‘I assume that everything is in order for their departure.’ As if his butler’s prompt appearance were not indication enough.

‘It is indeed, my lord.’

There is a trace of fervency in Chilton’s voice that has Hannibal’s lips twitching.

They troop together down the oak staircase, passing through the empty Painted Hall to the mosaiced passage that connects the entrance hall to the rest of the house. As they walk down column-flanked stone steps towards the front door, Hannibal finds the mysterious envelope pressed into his hand.

‘Do enjoy yourself.’

Although his curiosity as to its contents is piqued, fatigue is pulling at him; and after waving off his friends into the wan dawn, Hannibal returns to the blessed silence of the house with the envelope still unopened. Chilton hands him a newly-lit candle holder, after which Hannibal issues stern instructions not to be disturbed on any account until at least midday, and mounts the stairs for one final weary trek.

His bedchamber is in darkness but for a soft glow of red from the fire which is habitually lit every evening a few hours before he retires. Its remaining warmth draws him, and his eyes are on its dying embers as he tosses the envelope onto a chair and begins to undress. On occasions such as this, he generally eschews his valet’s help. Besides, given Randall’s penchant for leftover wine, it is likely that the rascal is lying in a stupor somewhere. Piece by piece, then, Hannibal peels away the constricting layers of dictated fashion, until all of his clothes lie draped across the chair and he turns, naked, to the bed.

Only then does he notice a gleam of white skin against the rouged tones of the counterpane, the delicate curve of a shoulder blade peeking through the half-closed curtains. Breath catching, Hannibal strides forward and grasps the curtains, bunching the material in his fists as he wrenches them open. No stable hand or kitchen boy or footman would dare take such a liberty - none have ever even been invited into this, their master’s most sacrosanct of private spaces. But there is one person - one unruly, defiant, *chaotic* boy - whom Hannibal believes quite capable of conducting himself in so forward a manner. And just like that, the mystery of Will Graham’s disappearance is solved.

No doubt disturbed by the noise, the boy unfurls and turns onto his back, raising himself on his elbows and blinking up like a lazy cat. Hannibal is riveted. Not merely by the sight of the unclothed boy on his bed - with his lissom limbs and lithe figure and half-hard little cock - but by the singular ornament that Will wears. Attached to a wide scarlet ribbon wound about his slender neck, it lies against his throat - the size of a guinea, of gold design, decorated with rubies and opals.

It is the answer to Margot’s riddle.

It is a birthday gift *for the count who has everything*.

It is a ladybird.

A harsh laugh cracks the thick silence, a dissonance in the captivating melody that has thus far drawn them together again and again.

Spoiled now.

Exposed as a lie, a deliberate orchestration. The boy only *playing* the part of besotted suitor after all, every honeyed line fed to him by another. His employer. *His pimp*.

Forgetting quite his own state of undress, Hannibal glares down at the naked, sleepy-eyed boy - his *gift* - and recalls with scorching self-derision how *charmed* he had been by the idea that Will Graham, who by all accounts changed bed partners as easily as most changed clothes, had pursued him to Derbyshire, singling him out as worthy of so much trouble and expense. *Expense. Hah. What is the going rate for whores these days?*

Oblivious to the gathering storm clouds, the boy sighs, smiles. Extends a hand in silent invitation.

Repudiation is swift.

'What manner of charade is this? How dare you invade my privacy so flagrantly?'

Will's smile falters. 'Has not Lady Margot explained -'

'What?' Hannibal speaks now in a voice heavy with disparagement. 'That the pair of you have been scheming behind my back? That because of my unmarried status you thought me in the market for a hired strumpet?'

'I - we - thought that you were desirous of my company.' Softly, Will adds, 'As I am desirous of yours.'

'For a no doubt exorbitant fee,' Hannibal scoffs.

A flicker of impatience darkens blue eyes. 'I am here because I wish to be. The *fee* is of little matter.'

'How nice for you. But rather short-sighted, given that no one thought to consult *my* feelings on the matter.' Hannibal's lip curls. 'Now get up. I have had quite enough nonsense for one day.'

And as the scowling creature finally shifts himself, slipping from the bed with unconscious grace, Hannibal averts his gaze, vowing silently and grimly to do all in his power to rid himself of Will Graham's beguiling, maddening presence as soon as possible.

Correct behaviour

Will's imaginings had been many and varied, playing out in glorious streams of colour across the canopied ceiling of the count's enormous bed as he had waited and squirmed and toyed with the trinket that Lady Margot had insisted was the necessary final touch for their little theatrical.

He had pictured the count flinging open the door and striding across the room to take Will into his arms (he had, after all, seemed eager enough to hold him close during their dining room dalliance). Or perhaps he would insist that Will went to *him*, to kneel on the opulent carpet and demonstrate with

hands and mouth his appreciation for his new position. Will had considered many different endings to the night. Except this one.

The *single* bed to which he has been relegated, in the room *next door* to the count's, is cold and narrow. He turns from his side onto his back and shivers. No, that does not help. Late spring it may be, but the nights are not yet exactly balmy, and the fireplace is bare. Perhaps another blanket… But from where? The room is furnished so sparsely, he suspects it to have been long-abandoned. Besides, conducting any sort of search would necessitate getting up; and there is just enough of a kernel of spreading warmth to encourage him instead to resume his previous position, curled inward with knees slotted practically beneath his chin. The stupid ladybird bauble scratches, and in a fit of pique Will yanks it free. He sits up and flings it, ribbon and all, across the bare floorboards before promptly burrowing back beneath the covers. He squeezes his eyes shut - against the emptiness of this unprepossessing room, against the forlorn sight of the abandoned piece of jewellery, against the harshness of the count's words as he had loomed over his own much larger (*and infinitely more comfortable, damn him*) bed, naked and resplendent and dripping contempt.

'What manner of charade is this? Do you think me in the market for a hired strumpet? Get up this instant.'

Why had he obeyed without question, like a chastised child? Allowed himself to be bundled next door, to stand blinking stupidly as terse orders had been barked at him to *stay put* and *sleep here* while, presumably, arrangements were being made for him to be thrown into a carriage (at best) and conveyed to the nearest town to wait for a public coach back to London? He curses silently, and then not so silently. The sound is startlingly loud, for in this barely-furnished room there is not enough to muffle it.

A thought occurs. It is entirely inappropriate, quite outrageous and, just possibly, genuinely wicked.

Will grins.

He shifts again onto his back and closes his eyes. Ignoring the lumps in the mattress and the coolness of the inadequate sheets, he returns in his mind to the count's dining room. Thoughts push to the fore - of long, caressing fingers and a rasping tongue pleasuring his nipples. Will lifts his hand to his chest and begins alternately pinching and rubbing the little buds. It is a poor substitute, but combined with the images in his head it is just about enough. His lips part on a sigh and his other hand drifts down to fondle his stiffening cock as he imagines the count - stern and impassive - sucking stinging kisses into his inner thigh. Restless, growing warmer every moment, Will sets a slow rhythm of alternately stroking and rubbing. He bites his lower lip as he massages the sensitive spot just beneath the head: he wants quite dreadfully for it to be another hand that is bringing him to the edge. In his imagining, it is. In his imagining, the count turns and brushes his smooth cheek against Will's burgeoning length before moving to take it into his mouth. Will's whimpers grow in volume and frequency until they fill the emptiness all around. He delights in them, tipping his head back and adding a few loud groans into the mix for good measure. It is a performance and yet not. For he is not sure now whether he could stop even if he tried, and his movements grow increasingly frantic as he lives out this all too real fantasy, muscles tightening, heat blooming. He raises his knees and kicks off the sheets, thrusting up into the tunnel of his fist. And as his pleasure grows, so he allows his voice free rein. An urgent keening rises and rises. He is close now, so close to -

'*For the love of the gods*!'

A door - a *connecting* door that Will had failed previously to notice - crashes open with such force that it shakes the bed frame. And there stands the count: still naked, still angry, and now most *wondrously* aroused. Will's hand stills and he stares.

Will has had his share of cock and he loves it. Taking it, giving it… It must, of course, be his choice of when and where and whether he will drink his lover down (Sutcliffe could be insufferably insistent on that score) but generally speaking, Will can be rendered perfectly content if he has a cock to play with. This cock - *Lecter's* cock - is long and thick and beautiful. It stands out ramrod-straight, flushed deep red, moist at the tip.

'Oh,' breathes Will, and his eyes grow slumberous with lust.

Lecter's gaze narrows to slits. 'Was that little performance for my benefit?' he snarls, prowling forward to tower over the narrow bed. 'To what end, pray? Did you think that depriving me of sleep would somehow improve my humour?'

'It might if you would allow me to join you in that nice big bed of yours.' Will's hand returns to squeeze his own neglected cock and he bites his lip again, teeth dragging over it as he eyes the magnificent form of the man standing over him, half cloaked in shadow. 'Let me please you in whatever ways you wish.'

Eyes of amber fire rake over Will's body, entirely bare and recumbent atop the mess of discarded sheets. 'You want to please me, is that it?' Derision colours the count's tone. 'You want to *serve my needs*?'

Ah, so he has read the letter - the *contract*, as Lady Margot had insisted on calling it. And what amusement *that* had provoked. Never before had Will negotiated the terms of an arrangement in so business-like a manner.

'*And, in return, be granted all the privileges and entitlements that said position warrants*,' recites Will lazily, eyes still fixed on that swaying cock, '*for a term of no less than a twelvemonth*.'

Lecter stands before him in much the same manner as when he had ordered Will out of his bed. Except that now his cheeks are red and his breathing is uneven and…

'What, I wonder,' he asks, voice rough, taking another step forward and then another until he stands at the very edge of the bed, 'could you possibly have to offer that would induce me to take you into my household for an entire twelve months?'

Will opens his mouth to reply, but the sassy retort dies on his lips as Lecter takes himself in hand and begins a slow, purposeful stroking. Up and down, fingers curling and uncurling around taut flesh. His eyes pin Will to the bed, and when Will's hand moves again to encase his own jerking cock, Lecter raps out a sharp, 'Leave it. This is about pleasing *me*, is not it?'

'Yes.' And Will's eyes widen as he realises the count's purpose. 'Oh, yes.' Flushed, he wriggles further down the bed and props himself up on his elbows, gaze hungry on the flushed head that bobs now tantalisingly close. 'May I -'

'You may not.' The iciness of the count's tone is entirely at odds with the vigorous working of his hand and the heat of his regard. 'I have a mind to decorate that pretty white skin of yours. It would *please me* to have you still and quiet while I do so.'

Already, pearlescent beads well from the tip; a manicured thumb swipes through them, and the sound of spreading slick against slapping flesh is deliciously filthy. Will's tongue flicks out to moisten dry lips. He wants to touch himself. He wants to feel the weight of Lecter's cockhead on his tongue. He wants. He *wants*.

He grasps at the twisted sheets, rutting up into nothingness. His eyes flick back to Lecter's face, to hair falling silky across a sweat-sheened brow, to lips drawn back in a silent snarl. Their gazes catch and hold. And Will *moans*, utterly wanton, utterly unashamed.

In the next instant, the count's face is inches from his own, one arm braced against the mattress as he fucks into his fist with a ferocity that has Will entirely enraptured, held in thrall by both the baseness of the act and the hot darkness of Hannibal Lecter's unwavering gaze. And forgetting quite the order to be silent and still, he whispers roughly, 'Come for me, my lord. Mark me with your spend.'

A bitten back oath is the only warning before ropes of white lace Will's stomach, and he gasps, giddy with triumph. What power is to be found in this one heady moment of absolute control. Except that - *oh, oh* - all of a sudden, his abdominal muscles flutter and tighten; his breath hitches; and to his utter chagrin, he comes hard all over himself. Untouched. Stunned, he collapses back onto the bed, throwing an arm across his eyes as aftershocks shudder through him. He needs a few moments to recover, to process, to…

SLAM.

Flinching, Will does not bother uncovering his eyes. He can *feel* the count's absence in spaces which are now, once again, hollow and cold. No matter. So intense an ending has unnerved him. He has never, *never*… Goose bumps prickle his flesh. He rolls from the bed, seeks out a chamber pot, and relieves himself. Crawling back onto the ruin of sheets, he finds the driest and wraps it around himself, turning his back on the much-abused connecting door. After so much excess of energy, sleep comes quickly; but even as he drifts off, Will's brow is puckered fretfully.

***

A single, polite knock on the *outer* door and a muffled, 'A bath has been drawn for you, Mr Graham,' rouses him from light, restless slumber.

'Thank you,' he croaks. 'Wait just one moment, please.'

He struggles to extricate himself from the sheet and sits up, fingers snagging on tangled curls as he attempts to pass a hand through his hair. The prospect of a bath is welcome indeed; rarely has he felt this filthy. He notices his trunk on the floor at the end of the bed. Someone must have retrieved it from the count's bedchamber and brought it in while still he slept. Placed on top of the closed lid are his ladybird mask and the necklet that he had cast aside so sulkily the previous night. But of his clothes, which he recalls leaving in a heap beside the count's bed, there is no sign.

With the sheet bunched around his waist, Will goes to the door and opens it cautiously. On the other side stands a uniformed man of perhaps early middle age, with neatly-combed black hair, a close-trimmed beard, and a shrewd green gaze. Will recognises him as the butler, and wonders briefly why the head of the household is performing this menial duty.

'My clothes from the party -'

'-are being laundered, sir. You will find a fresh set within the washroom.'

'Ah, thank you. Where is -'

'Along this corridor and the second door to your right.'

The butler's brisk manner is slightly unnerving. Will follows his pointing finger and realises that he is being directed to a chamber immediately on the other side of the count's.

'Thank you, er -'

'Chilton, sir. When you are finished, ring the bell and I shall escort you downstairs.'

To face the judgement of the master of the house, no doubt. With a resigned huff, Will turns and heads for the washroom, almost tripping over the bed sheet in his haste to regain some measure of privacy. He can feel the butler's critical gaze following him down the corridor, and fervently he wishes that he had thought at least to grab his breeches when he was being shooed out of the count's bedroom.

The washroom is small but pleasantly appointed. Besides a deep bathtub of gleaming copper, the chamber contains a sturdy table with bowl and pitcher, a small brass handbell, numerous folded linen bath sheets, and a pile of clean clothes that Will recognises as his own, evidently retrieved from his trunk. Beneath the table are his favourite boots, freshly polished and gleaming.

In addition, just to the side of a large window there stands a strange cylindrical contraption, almost ceiling-high, consisting of a circular metal base, vertical pipes screened by curtains of pale cream, and some sort of tank above. Curious. Perhaps, if he is allowed to remain, he will ask the count about it.

Returning his attention to the bathtub, Will drops the bed sheet and climbs in. The water is wonderfully warm and deep, and he settles back with a sigh of pleasure. Finally, an opportunity to rid himself of the grime of the long journey from London, not to mention the remaining traces of his *encounters* with the count. A large bar of pine-scented soap lies atop the table just within reach, and soon Will is busy scrubbing himself from head to toes, no easy accomplishment in such a narrow receptacle. Give him an early morning swim out of doors any day over all this fussing.

But it is not early morning: indeed, judging by the position of the sun that shines through the window past a cluster of oaks, gilding their tops, he would say rather that it is now late afternoon. Will does not linger in the soapy water, but stands upright in the tub to rub dry his upper body until his skin is pink and water no longer drips from his curls, which he thrusts back from his face with impatient fingers. They fall continuously into his eyes as, having stepped out onto smooth floorboards, he proceeds to dry his lower half. Perhaps he should apply to Lecter for permission to adopt a short Caesar style - if, that is, he is to stay.

Once dressed, and feeling a deal more composed than when he had entered, Will slips from the washroom to find the corridor mercifully butler-free. For a moment he hesitates, remembering the bell, but memory serves well enough for him to find his way back to the top of the cantilevered staircase, and judging by the preoccupied frowns on the faces of the few scurrying servants that he encounters, they are still busy dealing with the aftermath of the party.

At the top of the second set of scarlet-clad stairs, Will hears ringing footsteps on polished marble, and he peers down over a gold-wrought corner balustrade.

It is Hannibal Lecter, having evidently just returned from outside. He strides through the entrance hall, hair dew-tipped and boots mud-spattered. He is handsome and vigorous, and *damnation*, Will feels a shiver of arousal at the sight of him. Abruptly, he backs away from the balcony, and listens as a second set of footsteps, rather more sedate, joins the first.

'How was your ride, my lord?' The butler, of course.

‘Fine.’ That single clipped word is evidence enough that the count’s mood has not improved in the hours since they… ‘Is our guest awake?’

‘He is now. I had to rouse him, sir.’ (*Snitch!*) ‘I took the liberty of having a bath drawn for him, and I had one of the maids lay out his clothes.’

A disapproving tongue click follows. ‘Where the deuce was Randall during all of this? It is his province; you have duties enough.’

At the mention of this Randall, the butler’s tone turns altogether more severe.

‘Alas, Mr Tier has been discovered sleeping in the grooms’ quarters. Again.’

‘Alright, Chilton, when he finally decides to show his face I will speak with him.’ After a pause, Lecter says, ‘I shall take my tea in the library, and you had better make enough for two. When you have deemed Mr Graham presentable, send him in, would you?’

‘Of course, sir.’

Of course, sir. Sourly, Will wonders what it must be like to have everyone around you dance to your tune. He has half a mind to return to his dismal room. But the idea that such an action might be perceived as him attempting to hide from his begrudging host is anathema to him. If the count has decided to send Will packing, then he will leave with his head held high and a jaunty tune on his lips. If he is to stay, then it must be clearly understood that…

‘I am not a schoolboy, to be summoned and dismissed by servants. If you wish to see me, then kindly tell me so yourself.’

It had not been entirely his intention to burst in upon the count in such dramatic fashion, disturbing the tranquility of the shaded library with its floor-to-ceiling bookcases and low-burning lamps. Nevertheless, Will derives a certain amount of satisfaction from the count’s sharp look upwards from his book.

He cannot resist prodding further. ‘Of course, if you wish me to *play* the schoolboy, then that is another matter entirely.’

‘Sit down.’

So brusque. Will affects an offended head toss, but flops into a nearby chair without further demur. Seated opposite him, on a sofa of royal blue embroidered with gold suns and planets, the count closes his book with a snap.

‘It may surprise you to learn that I have responsibilities that preclude my running around after slothful guests. Having said that, now that you have deigned finally to shift yourself from your bed, we may perhaps discuss the particulars of this proposed... arrangement.’

‘With clear heads, you mean?’

A wicked smile is met by narrowing amber eyes.

‘Just so. And on the understanding that I have not necessarily changed my mind about accepting my friend’s generous gift. I have merely decided to think on it some more.’

The insinuation is not lost on Will - that he is a *thing*, to be given or returned like so much garish jewellery. It would be easy to fall again to pouting, but where would be the fun in that?

‘Please,’ he purrs, kittenish, toying with a wayward curl, ‘do tell me if you would like some assistance in coming to a decision.’

The slight inflection is clearly not lost on Lecter, who snorts. ‘Your *charms* are not in question. And I have seen for myself that you are not lacking in… technique.’

Will chews on his lower lip. He has no intention of being evicted if he can avoid it. He has burned his bridges with Sutcliffe, citing an attack of conscience and an intention of returning forthwith to his family at Bath; and other than seeking out the dull as ditchwater Brauer, his only other option - actually to return home - is more unpalatable even than that.

‘And yet you have hardly tried me out at all.’

Amusement warms Lecter’s eyes to rich mahogany. ‘How very remiss of me.’

Encouraged, Will leans forward. ‘Well, then,’ he grins. ‘Where would you like me?’

‘Exactly where you are, if you please.’ His good humour evaporating as rapidly as it had surfaced, Lecter shakes his head in stern reproval. ‘Whatever exhibitionism you have been used to indulging in, it will not do here. These are not the upper rooms of Quant's. *If* I choose to have you, then it will be in my bedchamber.’

To have you. The words throb through him. But Will is careful not to betray his eagerness. ‘Then I am to stay?’

‘For the present.’ Lecter observes him almost broodingly. ‘A fortnight should be ample time for me to make my final decision.’

A fortnight. As a trial period, it is generous enough. Not that Will has ever been *auditioned* as a lover before - but then, these are unique circumstances.

‘I accept your proposal.’ He winks. ‘Shall we shake on it?’

Lecter rises from the sofa, a slight smile playing about his lips. ‘Come here.’ Softly.

Has the count changed his mind already about *exhibitionism* in the noble halls of his ancestral home? Obediently, Will jumps from his chair and crosses the short distance to stand before his would-be lover, heart beating a little unsteadily as Lecter regards him enigmatically for a few moments before taking hold of the ends of his sloppily-tied cravat.

‘Woeful,’ he tuts, fingers working rapidly to untie and reposition the loose knot.

‘I had no valet to assist me,’ shrugs Will.

At this, Lecter’s brows rise. ‘Forgive me for not having made appropriate arrangements the moment I discovered you lurking in my bedchamber.’

Will rolls his eyes. ‘I had no looking glass, either, you know.’

‘Dear me. How very remiss I have been.’ Lecter releases him at last, gaze drifting downward. ‘I shall instruct my man to tend you from tomorrow. For today, you look decent enough.’

Cheeks heating, Will steps back. ‘Thank you.’

Why his body insists on reacting to the count’s touch as if he were still an untried virgin, he cannot guess. It is certainly unnerving, and irritation with himself lends a snap to his words. But other than a quick, speculative glance, Lecter makes no comment.

There is a soft knock - surely more on account of politeness than anything else, as the double doors stand open - and the butler, Chilton, enters with a silver tea service arranged upon an ornate salver. He looks askance at Will.

‘Ah, Mr Graham. I see that you have found your own way downstairs.’

Chilton is clearly a force to be reckoned with, but Will has no intention of cowering.

‘‘And all without the aid of map or compass.’

‘Indeed,’ sniffs the butler. ‘You must be prodigiously proud of yourself.’

‘Oh, I frequently am.’

Lecter seems vastly entertained by this verbal sparring match. His eyes veritably twinkle as he says solemnly, ‘Mr Graham is to sojourn with us for a time, Chilton.’

‘How delightful.’ The dryness of the butler’s tone is indication enough of the *true* nature of his feelings. ‘And may one ask for how *long* a time your guest will be... gracing us with his presence?’

Lecter spares Will another glance, and his assessing gaze coaxes yet more colour into Will’s cheeks.

‘A fortnight to start, and then we shall see.’

Chilton is looking less and less thrilled as he lays out each item of the silver service upon a low adjacent table: teapot, cream jug, sugar pot, and two dainty cup and saucer sets that Will judges to be either Coalport or Spode.

‘Marvellous,’ mutters the butler before straightening up.

Will can only wonder at how old and deep an acquaintance must exist between servant and master for the former to be so free with his speech.

Instead of returning to his previous seat, he opts to deposit himself on the sofa. He half expects Lecter to object, or to remove himself to a chair, but the count sits back down beside him with nary a hesitation.

‘Thank you, Chilton. We can manage the rest.’

‘Very good, my lord.’

With a short bow, and one final withering look at Will, Chilton departs, closing the doors gently behind him.

Folding his arms, Will watches from beneath his lashes as Lecter pours the tea, nodding briefly as the count holds up the jug of cream in silent query.

‘Do you take sugar?’

‘Yes, thank you.’

‘You have a sweet tooth.’ The count, in contrast, adds only a slice of fragrant lemon to his own cup. ‘Somehow that does not surprise me.’

Will shrugs. ‘You think me spoiled.’

‘I did not say -’

‘No matter. I am. Or, at least, I have been.’

There is the slightest pause before Lecter hands him his cup and saucer, gold-edged bone inlaid with berries and fronds of curling fern.

‘You are certainly fond of having the last word.’

‘I did not have it last night.’

The words are pushed out by the peevish thoughts behind them, but Lecter’s reply, low and husky, leaves Will floundering.

‘Did not you? *My* recollection is quite different.’

Lust-drowsed eyes on a mouth taut with pleasure. And a whispered command. ‘Come for me, my lord. Mark me with your spend.’

Will’s teacup becomes suddenly an object of intense fascination to him, and he holds it up to inspect more closely the gilded flora. ‘Is this Coalport?’

‘Spode.’ How hatefully knowing the count sounds. ‘A gift from Josiah Spode to my father. The first Josiah, I should say. His son runs the business now.’

This mention of the late count sharpens Will’s interest. He takes a careful sip of the hot tea. ‘Your own father - you were close to him?’

‘Very.’

‘Yet you feel the weight of his legacy.’

‘You think so?’

The patronising tone needles him and he sets down his drink. ‘All this emphasis on correct behaviour within these walls, as if you fear being discovered with your breeches down.’

‘I fear no discovery of anything. I *choose* to live a certain way *within these walls*.’ Yet Lecter’s eyes have darkened and a note of defensiveness has crept in.

Shifting sideways, Will places a very deliberate hand on the count’s knee. ‘But why? When there is so much pleasure to be had? So many delights to be shared? Why save it all for the darkness?’

‘Stop that.’ Lecter has gone rigid, and he stares straight ahead.

It is hardly a vehement command, and so Will dares more. Slowly, he leans in, so close that he can scent pine and woodsmoke on the count’s skin. His hand creeps upwards as he whispers, ‘They are your walls now.’

In the instant after his thumb tip brushes the slight bulge between Lecter's legs, Will finds his hand clamped in a vice and a smouldering pair of amber eyes boring into his.

'I said,' snarls the count, '*stop*.'

And still, Will cannot help but push a little more. He knows desire when he sees it, and there is no doubting that Lecter desires him. As for his *own* yearnings, they are focused solely on this intriguing man. For now, at least. It stands to reason, he thinks, that until he is allowed full satiation of all the scenarios and possibilities that throb between them, he will be unable to think of much else but fucking and being fucked by Hannibal Lecter.

'Oh, come on,' he whines. 'Or are we to sit drinking tea all day?'

Lecter's lip curls. 'Bored already? Perhaps you should take a tour of my stables. I have several willing boys who would be only too happy to service you if you cannot wait for nightfall.'

Unaccountably hurt, Will tugs himself free. 'You do not require constancy, then, in this arrangement?'

In an abrupt move, Lecter rises from the sofa and crosses to the door. Hand on the knob he pauses, his profile severe and starkly beautiful, his countenance grim. 'In this moment, I am not at all sure that there should *be* any arrangement.'

***

After sulking on the sofa for a good quarter of an hour, Will pushes himself up and paces about the room, scuffing at the Axminster with its obnoxiously cheerful fleurs-de-lys in bold hues of red and black against vivid gold. Its colour is too reminiscent of its master's eyes, so instead Will directs his gaze upwards to the gilded stucco ceiling. Exuberant images of gods and flora in the Baroque style are painted within a sequence of roundels. Will cannot immediately identify the artist - Rubens, perhaps. The entire room is an homage to history and culture - and a refinement that Will knows he has been judged as entirely lacking in. Perhaps that is his own fault for having made so bold with his advances. Perhaps he has grown too used to keeping company with men disinterested in anything else that he might have to offer…

His eyes track to the high gallery which runs the length of the room on one side and ends abruptly above a double doorway at the opposite end. There is no ladder or other visible means of gaining entry, so he returns his attention to ground level. A rotating octagonal table contains inlaid bookshelves crammed with tomes of varying sizes. Walking around it, Will casts curious eyes over the collection, stopping when he notices several volumes of the Encyclopædia Britannica - the most recent fourth edition. Having been unable to persuade Sutcliffe to update his own collection, this is a find indeed. Mood lifting, he extracts a volume at random and removes to a high-backed armchair by the fireplace to browse its crisp, closely-printed pages and richly-textured copperplates. It is easier by far to consider the complicated processes of a burning mirror rather than attempt to fathom the workings of Hannibal Lecter's mind.

***

Only when his legs and neck have developed an unpleasant stiffness does Will look up again from the weighty volume. He uncurls from the armchair, stretches, winces, and debates his next move. It would serve Lecter right if he did, in fact, head straight for the stables - the stable block is ostentatious enough not to be mistaken - and find a decent-looking lad to help work out his frustrations. He could lie down in the hay, spread his legs and enjoy a good, thorough servicing. No conversation, no

emotion, no convoluted *arrangement* with a set of arbitrary rules. Just a pretty face, a serviceable cock, and a drive towards a nice, quick orgasm.

Will can feel the need for it thrumming under his skin. It is this room, this place, this *house* that reeks of power and sensual tastes and *him*. Hannibal Lecter, with his sleek golden brown hair and his straight nose and penetrating eyes and sensuous, sculpted lips - as if the gods had indulged themselves the day they had assembled him.

He snorts at the fanciful turn that his thoughts have taken. It is time to wake up and shake off these childishly romantic ideas. He will do it - he *will* seek out another, albeit temporary, outlet for his needs. For to find himself becoming in any way *attached* to the count would surely be the biggest of all follies. It is this final acknowledgement that spurs Will to leave the serenity of the library and solicit a footman to direct him outside via the nearest exit. The blushing boy - though in all probability a mere year or so older than Will - does so most charmingly, and Will elicits his name before releasing him to his duties. It is not, however, *Joel's* smiling face that occupies his mind as he follows a broad path uphill to the grand quadrangle of sandstone that houses the estate's stables. It is not a *smiling* face at all.

He enters beneath an impressive central arch, above which soars a domed clock tower. Pointed golden hands proclaim the oncoming hour of seven - indeed, the shadows are beginning to lengthen, and the light is of that rich tinge which precedes twilight. All is fairly quiet within: except for the rustic chorus of whinnies and restless stomping, there is little of activity to be seen. A lone groom sweeps the cobbled courtyard; upon Will's approach, he stops and tips his cap. As polite as the lad is, he is unprepossessing in looks, and Will passes by with the barest of acknowledging nods.

Perchance he will have better luck procuring company within the privacy of the block itself. Set stubbornly on his course, he steps out of the spring warmth into the cool shade of the nearest wing, and glances down a narrow passage that runs parallel to at least a dozen wide stalls. Most of them are occupied, and a few of the nearer horses observe Will with nostrils flared, tossing their gleaming manes as if in skittish greeting. It looks as if the final few stalls are empty, although the sound of rhythmic thumping and creaking suggests a presence of some sort. One of Lecter's stable hands, perhaps, working up a nice sweat with a spade…

Licking his lips, cock stirring in anticipation, Will saunters down the passage - and stops dead when he notices thin hands clenching an upper bar of the farthest most stall partition. A moment later, a sweat-drenched forehead bobs up into view, and an unmistakable sound issues from lips as yet hidden. A reedy, 'uh, uh, uh.'

And then, a second voice. One which Will recognises all too well. Except that never has he heard it quite so… unmade.

'You like that. You want it harder, I can tell.'

Will swallows down an odd combination of outrage and lust. He stills to listen as the thumping increases in intensity.

'Yes, my lord, please. Harder, my lor-'

The final word is muffled, and there is a hissed, 'Silence. You promised me silence. Take what I give you and be grateful.'

'Oh, I a-am.'

An involuntary gasp escapes Will, and he clamps both hands over his mouth, but it is too late. Over the partition, a pair of startled eyes appear; and the boy who, even now, is being fucked soundly by the master of the house, cries out, ‘Oh, lord save us! Who are you?’

Will laughs - a sharp, brittle sound - and spins on his heel to stalk back out into the evening.

Discomposed

Silence.

Hannibal had asked it - demanded it - of Fred, when discomposure and agitation had driven him from the house to seek out a measure of his own advice. *A willing body, a mindless servicing*. And why not? After all of that touching and wheedling in the library, his blood had been well and truly up. But to have given in and *rewarded* Will (the outrageous little coquette) for his pestering? Hannibal's pride had simply not allowed it.

‘Silence.’

He had curtailed Fred’s inane attempts at flattery (‘I were thinking about you today, when I were watching Chaser at stud’), whipping the boy around and pushing into him with minimum preparation and eyes closed, a brooding imagining forming that it was a *different* body he was penetrating.

‘I require no words from you.’

The squirrel-like noises he could tolerate as a small price to pay. He had just needed an outlet, a return to clarity. Instead…

‘Oh, lord save us! Who are you?’

And a laugh - or a facsimile of one. Short and scornful. *Will*.

Guilt is not a concept with which Hannibal is overly familiar. Why should it be? Has not he spent the majority of his three-and-twenty years - nay, since yesterday four-and-twenty - in judicious pursuit of the perfection which his father had demanded of his heir? Applying himself to his lessons as a boy; *studying* at Oxford when his name alone had assured him of success as a first classman; assuming with solemn acceptance the mantle of count mere weeks after his graduation, upon the sudden death of Filip Lecter. His private sports, his appetites - none have been indulged to the detriment of his family’s reputation. He has been generous with his staff and loyal to his friends. And never has he toyed with another person’s affections.

Then why, the instant he hears that condemning laugh, does he freeze as if he has been caught in the midst of some unconscionable act? Embarrassing, perhaps. Humiliating for the poor stable hand, who stutters and fumbles his way out of the stall. Hannibal winces as he tucks himself away, unsatisfied and fighting a ridiculous wave of mortification. He rests one clenched fist on the cold stone wall, recalling with stark clarity the several times he has witnessed Will *in flagrante delicto*, and been expected to tolerate the sight. An irritating inner voice reminds him that that was different - it was before. Before Margot and her damned interfering and her *contract*. And last night...

The stall door swings gently on its hinges and Hannibal kicks it open with little heed to either the fine-grained wood or the four-legged residents of the wing, who huff and stamp in complaint. He mutters dark things as he passes each stall, following the muddy prints left by Will. The boy has had only a few minutes’ headstart, but when Hannibal walks out of the stable block he sees no sign of him in any direction.

Disquiet sits heavy in his gut. The Vergers are due to arrive at half past eight, and it simply will not do to subject them to an evening of combativeness. Well, first things first. Decisiveness lengthening his strides, Hannibal heads back down the hill towards the house, taking a turn that will lead him to one of the North Wing servants’ entrances and thus hopefully allow him to avoid Chilton’s stern gaze. If Randall has at last pulled himself together, then Hannibal’s bath will have been drawn by now: he shall avail himself of it and scrub away the evidence of this rather unfortunate evening before seeking out Will for an attempt at appeasement. With any luck, order can be restored before Margot and Mason come clamouring for their supper.

He is so busy congratulating himself on the neatness of this plan that upon entering his washroom it takes Hannibal several seconds to realise that it is occupied already. Pale twin shoulder blades rise from the depths of the bathtub. Above them, willowy arms hold aloft an earthen jug. It is tipped to pour clear water onto inky curls which stretch and spill onto a curved white nape. Will Graham, whom Hannibal had imagined to be off sulking in some corner, is sitting in *his* bath enjoying the steaming benefits of *his* hot water.

The jug is set down and soap slicked along those slender arms, which now are stretched up above the boy's head in a gesture tantalisingly reminiscent of a certain *other* time - the *first* time - that Hannibal had looked and *seen* and *wanted*.

And now can *have*.

He continues to admire in silence the boy's slow soaping while he strips off his coat, waistcoat and cravat with a rough eagerness that he is beginning to realise is a unique response to Will. Each article adds to the pile at his feet. Boots are next, then stockings and garters. His hands are at his waist, pulling free the shirt from his breeches, when a firm voice halts him.

'That will be enough for now, I think.' And in the next moment, Will turns around and levels at Hannibal the most insolent of looks. 'You may take your turn when I am finished.'

Turn?

Finding his own voice, Hannibal issues a stern reminder. 'This is, in fact, *my* bath. It was drawn for me as it is every evening at this time.'

'My deepest apologies, my lord,' says Will, in a show of mock contrition, 'but when I came up to change for dinner, I found all of this lovely hot water just sitting here, and I felt what a waste it would be if it were not put to use - you being otherwise engaged and all.'

In these final words, Hannibal catches an edge of acidity. Pointedly, he enquires, 'And what precisely was *your* intention in visiting the stables this evening?'

Will's gaze skitters away and he begins scooping water over his arms and chest to rid himself of the soap, trickling liquid creating silver trails across his skin that Hannibal finds unaccountably fascinating.

'It was your suggestion, was not it?'

This wilful obtuseness deserves no acknowledgment. Mouth firming, Hannibal takes hold of his shirt by the hem and pulls it up and off. It falls from his fingers, and he perceives with satisfaction the rounding of blue eyes.

'Whether or not you intend to get out, *I* am getting in.'

The tub is barely large enough but he supposes that it could hold two: if, for instance, Will were to sit in his lap. Images from the previous night flash before him: in the dining room, holding the wriggling boy firmly against him, tasting berry-like nipples, rutting them both to orgasm; and then later, driven by taunting need to bend over that pale, slender body and paint it with his seed, as Will had looked back up at him with desire, syrup-thick, and shaken apart in silent reciprocation… *Gods*, the mere memory of it is making him hard again.

Will's eyes narrow. 'Very well, my lord.'

So lost in lustful thoughts is Hannibal that he fails to register the significance of this coolness. All that he sees is Will rising from the bathtub like a nymph, water streaming down the contours of his firm young body. As he steps from the tub Hannibal reaches for him, anticipating with eagerness the pleasures to come, the uninhibited exploration of Will's body, the prospect of Will's mouth on *him* - they have a good hour before they will be required downstairs and Hannibal intends to make the most of it. He is unprepared for Will's swift sidestep.

‘I think not.’

Hands falling to his sides, Hannibal stares. ‘You expect me to believe that you do not want this, after all of your incessant whining?’

Will returns his look with an aloofness that is almost convincing, save for the betraying evidence of flushed cheeks and peaked nipples and half-hard cock. ‘What is the matter, my lord? Was not your appetite sufficiently satisfied by your *grateful* stable boy?’

‘Did that upset you?’ Hannibal cannot help but sound a little smug. ‘Would you like me to convince you that it meant nothing?’

‘Of course it meant nothing.’ Scornful, Will reaches for a bath sheet. ‘It always means nothing. Please do not mistake disdain for jealousy.’

‘Oh, so you disdain me?’ Shaking his head, Hannibal smiles and steps up to the beautiful, naked, resentful boy. ‘Allow me to change that state.’

This time, Will stands his ground, and his next words are soft steel. ‘If you touch me now, I shall leave this house tonight and not return.’

Their gazes clash and Hannibal’s smile evaporates. ‘Whatever game it is that you are playing, Mr Graham, I grow wearier of it by the moment.’

By way of reply, Will performs one of those head tosses at which he is so expert and stalks out, bath sheet trailing behind him. The click of the door is a definitive full stop, and there is nothing for Hannibal to do but fume and mutter and take his *lukewarm* bath alone.

***

‘My lord, you simply must allow us to borrow LeBeau for our next dinner party.’ Leaning towards Will, Margot explains, ‘His Lordship’s Parisien cook is the envy of the ton. There is a running bet on whether anyone will ever be able to tempt him away from Lecter House. I, of course, have my money placed squarely on His Lordship.’

‘Of course you do,’ intones Hannibal dryly. ‘And I have no doubt that you have also a sizeable amount placed on yourself. Do not think that I am unaware of the missives passing back and forth between LeBeau and your lady’s maid.’

‘Papa refuses to part with our cook, Cordell,’ continues Margot, avoiding with adroitness the laid bait, ‘even though the man is terribly suspicious of anything even vaguely French-sounding and insists on serving cabbage with everything.’

‘Even the desserts?’

Hannibal frowns at the pert question, although he refrains from acknowledging the source of it. Dinner has been served in the Oak Room, an altogether more intimate setting than the awful splendour of the dining room. This works wonderfully in allowing for easy conversation... except in cases such as tonight, when the light perfume of rosemary is an entirely unwanted reminder of water that had lapped separately over two bodies because of a certain individual’s determination to *withhold* and *taunt*.

‘Naturally.’ Mason, grinning at Will in blissful ignorance of the silent war being waged across the table, takes up his sister’s cause. ‘Which creates something of a dilemma, if you follow my meaning.

One hesitates, for example, to invite the notoriously snobbish Lord Hyde to an evening that may at any time descend into flatulent farce.'

'Yes, thank you, Verger. Your meaning is all too plain,' snaps Hannibal.

While Margot stifles a giggle, and Mason raises fair eyebrows in mock horror, Will comments languidly, 'But then you have a liking for the plain - the *ordinary* - do not you, my lord?' He is peeling an orange, deft fingers dissecting with delicate manipulation as he speaks, eyes fixed on his task.

Hannibal feels Mason and Margot's curious glances skate between them, and clamps down on a rush of anger. For Will to allude *in company* to his assignation with the stable hand is completely unacceptable, no matter how subtle he might think he is being. Still, Hannibal forces lightness into his reply.

'In its proper place, I do.' And then, unable to resist a prod of his own, 'I have found that certain… procurements are most rewarding when they are unvarnished.'

'Unskilled?' fires back Will.

'Un*spoiled*.' With grim emphasis.

Will shrugs, his expression downright scathing. 'Un*remarkable*.'

'Gracious, what is this? Some sort of word game?' Margot arches one fine brow, her gaze at once amused and assessing. 'May we know the rules, that we can join in?'

He ought to be angry with her - if not for this ludicrous birthday scheme, Hannibal would not have spent the entire day torn between incensement and arousal. But Margot Verger is just the type of sweetly careless person with whom it is almost impossible to be truly irate.

Instead of berating her, therefore, he says with mock solemnity, 'It is - how shall I say - un jeu pour deux.'

A game for two.

Margot's eyes widen and she claps her hands together. 'How perfectly splendid! You see, Mason? I told you that all would be well between them. Ah, but let us change the subject,' darting an apologetic glance at Will. 'We shall make poor Mr Graham blush.'

'Have no fear on that score, Lady Margot,' Hannibal says, reluctant admiration tweaking his lips upwards as he watches Will cutting into his trout with an air of perfect unconcern. 'Mr Graham is made of sterner stuff than you might suppose. Underestimate him at your peril.'

Will's fork halts midway to his mouth, and he looks up, surprise lightening previously stormy eyes to cerulean. And for the first time since reuniting with Will in the Painted Hall to greet the Vergers, Hannibal finds his gaze being returned with something approaching warmth.

This fragile peace is very nearly ruined in the next instant, however, when Mason remarks cheerfully, 'I warrant you are glad now at my discovery of our talented young friend. Although I must say it struck me as odd that you had not encountered him before, given the frequency of your own visits to Quant's.'

There is a rather awkward pause before Margot (who, judging by Mason's suddenly pained expression, has kicked him beneath the table) launches into raptures over the menu. Thus the subject moves on from Quant boys to confections of a different sort; and when at length individual citron cheesecakes served in delicate teacups are placed before them, the whole party falls appreciably - and mercifully - silent.

***

'When exactly are you holding this party of yours?' Hannibal asks Margot from across the card table.

'We thought a fortnight hence,' she replies, eyes brightening. 'Does that mean that you will consider lending LeBeau to us?'

'For one evening,' he reminds her sternly, 'and no below-stairs horseplay.'

'I cannot even begin to fathom your meaning,' tuts Margot. 'My lady's maid is corresponding with an acquaintance in the Canadas. She has enlisted LeBeau to help improve her French, that is all.'

Hannibal shoots her a look of wry disbelief but is distracted from pursuit of the topic by Mason who, situated on his left, throws down his cards in exasperation.

'Hard luck, Verger. Out again? How many times does that make?'

'Too many,' grumbles Mason, taking a consolatory gulp of wine. 'Give me whist any day. These games of chance are far too apt to spoil a perfectly good evening.'

'Only because *you* are a perfectly sore loser,' returns Margot, with that special brand of friendly scorn that seems to be reserved for siblings. 'And now it is your turn, Mr Graham. Shall you stand or twist?'

Will is seated on Hannibal's right. His elbow rests close to Hannibal's on the felted table top, and every now and then they nudge together, creating a decidedly pleasant frisson. For *Hannibal*, at least. As for Will, he pores over his cards with every appearance of unbroken concentration.

'I shall stand.'

The Will who had begged for Hannibal's attentions with sultry looks and wandering hands seems to have vanished into the ether. *This* Will, apparently entirely unaffected by his proposed lover's closeness, is too reminiscent of the mocking boy who had led Hannibal a merry dance of unrelenting provocation through that final week in London. *Teasing. Fickle*. Has it all, he wonders moodily, been an act?

Distracted, Hannibal reaches for a marzipan from the plate that has been passed around the table throughout the game. There are plenty still to choose from, Margot having declined to partake ('I declare it is a clever conceit, but I simply cannot get along with sweets disguised as fruit'), and he is hunting for a pomegranate with one eye on his cards when a misjudgement in aim sends the sweets shooting from the plate and a shower of sugary dust into the air. A deal of it settles on Will, and with a muttered apology Hannibal reaches down to brush white powder from the boy's slim thigh.

A barely perceptible inhale draws his attention back up to Will's face. And there, at last, is the most becoming tinge of pink. It spreads from the apples of the boy's cheeks to the tips of his ears; and when Hannibal gives that slim thigh an experimental squeeze, Will's eyes darken to wantonness.

It takes Herculean effort to remove his hand and return his attention to the game, as if he does not want this instant to dismiss the Vergers to the night and carry Will up to his bedchamber, to touch him

in *other* places and see that same immodest expression overtake him again and again. Indeed, some unnecessary fussing over the spill is necessary in order to divert attention from them *both*. For all of Hannibal's frowning and tutting, however, this attempt proves rather spectacularly unsuccessful.

'Dear me, sir. How discomposed you are over a mere sweet. I am sorry now not to have tried one. LeBeau must indeed be a superlative confectioner.' And with a naughty twinkle, Margot takes another card from the deck. 'Twist.'

***

Several games and a few glasses of elder wine later, the visit draws to a close with appreciation expressed on all sides. Will's earlier reserve has still not melted fully, but there has been enough of a thawing to encourage Hannibal in thinking that *touching* at least is now no longer out of the question.

He stands beside Will on the front step as Margot and Mason board their carriage, and Hannibal does not miss the wink that Margot bestows on him as she waves a farewell through the window. It is now a little after midnight, yet rarely has Hannibal felt as wakeful. He places a hand lightly on Will's shoulder, feeling the muscles beneath draw taut.

Quietly, he asks, 'Would you take a cup of chocolate with me before we retire?'

Will does not reply, but assent is given in a quick, jerk-like nod.

In the pink-tipped hour of dawn, wrongfooted, Hannibal had slammed the door on Will Graham and his practiced techniques. But since then, it has been easing open again one seductive sliver at a time.

They enter the library to find that the chocolate has been poured already, and its aroma tinges the air with sweetness. It has long been Hannibal's practice to take a cup here before bed, and Chilton being Chilton, the beverage is at the perfect temperature for drinking. Handing one cup to Will, Hannibal takes up the other, and they sit together on the sofa, eyeing each other over brims of fluted silver.

'What do you think?'

The expression of rapture on Will's face renders Hannibal's question redundant but he wants to hear him speak. There is much of pleasure to be gained, he has realised, simply from listening to the sweet musicality of the boy's voice.

'That perhaps you had better be wary about lending out your cook after all, even to your friend.'

Will's grin is chocolate-smeared. Without thought, Hannibal reaches out to smooth a thumb over the boy's plump lower lip. After a moment's hesitation, he brings it to his own lips and sucks it clean. Will looks back at him unblinkingly but his cup trembles on its saucer. It is an exhilarating betrayal. Exhilarating and utterly irresistible.

'Are you finished?' Hannibal asks, voice deepened by desire that runs honey-thick through his veins.

Of course Will has not finished. Neither has he. They have barely taken half a dozen sips between them. But unquenched lust has sat heavy in Hannibal's gut since Will last sat beside him on this sofa, murmuring of pleasures that should not be denied, his every touch a question mark. They have come full circle in the hours since. And that roiling, boisterous lust demands satisfaction.

'Most definitely.'

No persuasion is needed now, on either side. They are perfectly attuned. Will sets down his cup on the serving tray. Hannibal does the same. Unsmiling, he rises. And when Will follows, their palms slide together. Hannibal turns his nose into Will's hair, detecting again the herbal scent from his bath, faint yet still evocative. He speaks softly against the fine-boned shell of Will's ear, breath stirring the curls clustered there.

'The next time you appropriate my bathtub, little ladybird, I expect you to share it.'

A slight tremor is followed by characteristic spiritedness. 'If *you* shall make more of an effort to be agreeable, I may.'

Hands tightening around Will's, Hannibal pulls him closer until they are practically toe to toe. 'Oh, in this moment, Mr Graham, I am of a mind to be *exceedingly* agreeable.'

'Then I shall be happy to oblige you, my lord.'

So demure all of a sudden. Hannibal goes to brush a kiss against that sweetly-curving mouth, but Will is already slipping free. He retreats with a smirk, almost dancing on his toes.

'Where are you going?' Irked to have been denied, Hannibal is nevertheless intrigued. There is nothing in the least predictable about Will Graham, and that makes him an endlessly fascinating study.

A brow arches, cocky in triumph. 'To bed, sir.'

But whose?

A long, pale body stretched out atop the counterpane, a slash of scarlet at his throat.

Hannibal's cock throbs. He wets his lips. 'Go along, then.'

He watches the boy's sauntering departure through narrowed eyes. As much as he wants an end to games, to glimpses and teasing, it shall be Will's choice tonight. Should Hannibal enter his bedchamber to find it empty, he will not pursue the boy. For as desperate as he is to finish what was begun at his birthday party, with Will keening in his lap while Hannibal lapped the taste of desire from his smooth skin, what he wants even more is reciprocation.

And so he waits. Five minutes. Ten. Fifteen. Only then does he allow himself to follow.

In the silence of the house, the clip of his boots rings across marble, thuds up carpeted stone. The very sounds proclaim desperate eagerness. Hard, wanting, Hannibal cares not a whit. He comes to his chamber door and finds it gaping open. *Brazen*. Triumphant he enters, pulls shut the door, and throws the rarely-used bolt decisively into place.

And then finally he turns to the bed, to the boy who waits. This time, the curtains remain tied open. Nothing between them but air that shimmers expectation. Will lies on his back, propped up on skinny elbows, one hand toying with the ladybird necklet as he bites his lip and grins. His slim thighs are spread wide, pretty pink cock standing to attention, knees up, feet arched delicately against the counterpane.

On display, vain, wholly confident in his charms.

'I hope you did not allow Randall to see you like that.' It is a possessive growl.

Will rolls his eyes. ‘I told him that I was quite capable of undressing myself.’ He adds airily, ‘I also told him that I would see to *your* needs tonight.’

‘Did you, by heaven?’ With a deep chuckle, Hannibal crosses to the bed and sets one knee to it. He looms over the boy and studies him, gaze sweeping from the crown of that curly head to the toes curling into maroon silk. He places a palm flat to Will’s chest and spreads his fingers, thumb and little finger teasing budded nipples. ‘Is that your wish, saucy boy? To *see* to me?’

Will giggles and wriggles. ‘Yes, so let me up.’

‘Just a moment.’ It is too tempting by far, having the boy spread thus before him. Impossible not to have a taste, a sample at least. His hand trails lower, to cup that enticing little cock. ‘What is your age?’

An imperious brow rises. ‘Is not it a little late for that question?’

Hannibal looks up, gaze commanding. ‘No, it is not. What is your age, Will?’

There follows another roll of eyes and a huff, but at length the boy admits, ‘Seventeen.’

Hannibal blanches slightly but does not remove his hand. ‘And when shall you be eighteen?’

‘November.’ Will sighs and wriggles encouragingly. ‘Happy now?’

He is not. And were he not so very drawn to the boy, he might suggest waiting a six-month. But Hannibal knows, as he presses his palm down and Will rubs up into it, eyes half-closed, that he will not. *Cannot*, with so much temptation laid out before him. Besides, if he were to deny the voracious thing, goodness knows what antics he would get up to in retaliation. Hannibal has seen for himself how easily Will gives himself to those with money and position enough to provide for him. Age seems not to be a barrier: he thinks with a shudder of Brauer, prostrate in the anteroom at Almack’s, pawing at this glorious boy, unworthy of him in all but pocket, and almost twice his age. It certainly makes Hannibal’s seven years of seniority seem not so terribly significant an issue.

Stroking gently, Hannibal marvels at the decadent beauty of the boy whose head is thrown back, lips parted slightly, chest rising and falling with increasing rapidity. He is too excited, and Hannibal would have him last. No quick fumble this time. He suspects that furtive, base couplings are all that the boy has experienced; he will have Will know what it is to draw out pleasure for so long that, when its peak is reached, it is blinding in its exquisiteness.

‘Be still,’ he commands, and moves his other hand upwards to push gently until Will sinks back with a sigh to lie flat atop the mattress. Pleased by this acquiescence, Hannibal leans down to kiss one jutting hip bone.

He employs both hands, then, to pin down the lithe body at narrow hips, and Hannibal bows over the supine boy. He closes his lips over one nipple, peaked and pretty. Sucks strongly and stops only when Will gasps. With his tongue, he traces a path to the other nipple, and proceeds to lavish upon it the same attentions.

He feels slight fingers in his hair, tugging, and a voice, high and tight. ‘Oh. Oh, please.’

Hannibal lifts his head a fraction and looks up into eyes blown almost black. ‘You wish me to stop?’ He knows the answer, and he licks broad across pebbled flesh as he awaits the boy’s response.

A moan and a frantic shake of the head follow. ‘No, but I want - I want more. Put your mouth on me again but - lower.’

Demanding thing. Hannibal chuckles, and kisses his way down the thin body to the boy’s jerking cock. He allows, at first, just a graze of lips. A nuzzle against the side of warm, silky flesh. Then a taste, a long lick, curling his tongue around the slender girth. He cannot recall the last time he sucked cock or wanted to. Others have serviced *him*, of course. But there is in his eyes a certain servility to the act that has stayed him from reciprocation. Yet here he is, eager as a schoolboy, lapping at the tip before taking it finally between his lips. Hannibal feels his own cheeks heating with the strange pleasure that this is giving him: to kiss, open-mouthed and sloppy; to tease with his tongue until the slim member stands out full and stiff and red.

This, thinks Hannibal hazily, must be what it is to worship. And closing his eyes, he gives himself over to it.

Are you game?

Will whines, writhing, fists bunching the silk counterpane as the count alternates between a rhythmic bobbing up and down and gentle lipping. Large hands have him pinned to the bed. He is at the mercy of the golden god who has seen fit to claim him at last. And he wants it - welcomes it. Aches for Lecter's skin against his own.

He reaches blindly and tugs again at the count's hair. It slips, soft and straight, between his fingers. Lecter looks up, lips still wrapped around the head of Will's cock. He holds Will's gaze with heavy-lidded eyes darkened now to onyx. And slowly, he sucks. It is a sight so erotic, Will fears an abrupt

end to the proceedings. Something of warning must show in his wide eyes, for with a hum of amusement, Lecter lets him slip free.

‘Should I stop?’

Will shakes his head. ‘Just - allow me a few moments. Let me undress you. I would have you naked against me.’ His words slur a little.

Lips press gently to his cock, his stomach, before Lecter moves away to sit on the edge of the bed. ‘Come, then.’ Hair like burnished copper has spilled across his forehead, rendering him younger and softer than in daylight hours. ‘As you saw fit to dismiss Randall, it seems only fair that you should assume his mantle.’

Will rises without hesitation, although his brows lift in a mockery of surprise. ‘Is your valet on such close terms with you, my lord?’ He slips from the bed and comes to stand between Lecter’s parted thighs. Immediately, warm hands cup his bottom, drawing him closer. ‘Is this a perk enjoyed by all of your employees?’

‘Definitely not *all* of my employees.’ The dryness of Lecter’s tone is an indication that he is thinking now of the staid and proper Chilton. ‘And not Randall. The relationship between master and valet involves a level of intimacy best not muddied by such complications.’

Unaccountably pleased by this admission, Will turns his attention to his appointed task, and Lecter’s eyes are on him as he begins a careful stripping away. Coaxing arms from coat and waistcoat - the latter embroidered with gold and silver thread, telling a story of strange lands and leaping fish; working loose the knotted cravat; slipping his hands inside Lecter’s shirt to discover the delight of crisp hair scattered over strong pectorals; and once the count is naked from the waist up, flicking open cloth-covered buttons to allow Lecter’s swollen cock to spring free.

‘Oh my.’ Tentative, Will strokes its ruddy length. ‘You are beautiful.’ His lips part on a sigh of want and he sinks to his knees. He curls his fingers around the thick girth and directs a limpid gaze upwards. Asking permission.

A large palm cups the back of his head. ‘Yes.’ Gruff affirmation that is all he needs.

Although…

Slowly, Will tips forward until his forehead rests against the count’s flat stomach. His lips are so close to the head of that gorgeous cock that they brush against it as he speaks. Two words.

‘Tell me.’

He feels the clenching of muscles against his skin and permits a tiny smile as he waits.

A beat. Two.

‘Put your mouth on me.’ The words are like rough velvet. They shiver through him. ‘Make me come.’

Both hands are threaded now in Will’s hair. He likes their weight, the sense of security that they provide. Testing, he presses the tip of his tongue to welling stickiness. Oh yes, Lecter wants this. Wants it badly. It is balm to his injured pride after the events of the afternoon. Gently then, he laps, tracing invisible patterns around the sensitive slit before mouthing delicately over it, and he notes with glee the involuntary jerk of the count’s hips. He puts his hands on them and feels the hard play of muscles beneath his palms. He slides one hand around to delve into the loosened breeches and cup

one firm cheek; experimentally, Will traces his thumb down the dividing cleft. It elicits a shudder but he does not attempt to delve any deeper; it will only distract them both from his current purpose.

Little licks evolve to broad strokes, all concentrated around the head. Will enjoys the taste - salt and musk. He smiles and falls to kissing wetly, lipping around the substantial breadth. Eyes closed, mouth open, paying filthy homage.

Lecter is silent but for deep, regular breaths that are, nonetheless, betraying in their unevenness. What would it take, Will wonders, to coax him apart? To make him beg?

Lecter's cock throbs hotly with a fresh rush of blood - a similar rush, surely, to that which has Will's own strutted member practically dripping. If his pride were not so fierce, he would ask Lecter to touch him again. But he is used to taking care of himself as an afterthought. Besides, there is still much of pleasure to be derived from exploring steely silk. And in pursuing the breaking down of so much self-control...

As an aficionado of the pianoforte, Will knows well the importance of form: every composition demands a unique arrangement of tempo, metre and rhythm in order to pull from the instrument its sweetest sounds. *Adagio*, a slow tonguing. *Andante*, strumming lightly with the pads of his fingers. *Accelerando*, tongue lathing as fingers tighten and set to steady pumping. *Ostinato*, repeating that rough action until - there it is - Lecter's tightly controlled breaths seque at last into harsh pants. As reward, Will sucks the head into his mouth, encasing it completely. His hand slows, squeezes, speeds up again. *Rubato*, the freedom of expression that allows for a sudden cessation of all motion - the reaction to which is a punishing tug on his hair - and then fervent recommencement. Lecter's appreciation is expressed in a series of distinctly undignified grunts and a fresh welling of precome that leaks from the corners of Will's lips. He does not admonish himself for the messiness. The end draws near. To nudge it closer still, *vibrato*: humming deep in the back of his throat. He does not cease even as the fingers in his hair twist painfully; he wants it - wants everything that signals a fatal cracking in Lecter's self-control. So Will sinks lower, taking more, hollowing his cheeks in a dedication to the task that he does not often bother exercising. At the same time, he splays his hand across Lecter's backside and slides his middle finger in the crease. *Glissando*, up and down. The way is a little dry - had he thought to retrieve certain items from his trunk, he could have remedied that situation with ease - but it matters not, for the count groans, long and ragged. *Crescendo*. Will ignores the fisting of fingers that attempt now to drag him off. If anything, he wraps his lips more firmly around flesh that pulses hard and fierce, and he takes with determination the copious shows of Lecter's appreciation, swallowing with practiced vigour.

As the count drags in deep, juddering breaths, Will falls to light sucking, easing away by degrees until he is doing little more than keeping warm the softened cock that fits the contours of his mouth so wonderfully.

Finally, reluctantly, he allows it to slip free, and sits back on his heels that he might lay his cheek against the count's breeches-clad thigh and calm the racing of his own heart. The fingers in his hair grow lax, fall to stroking, and for several minutes there is no sound other than their mingled breathing.

But Will's blood runs hot still, and by and by he slips a hand between his thighs to rub furtively. His intention is to bring himself off silently and without disturbing the count; but unlike Sutcliffe, who would by now be slumped back on the bed, snoring, Lecter curves gentle hands around his shoulders and draws him upwards.

'Come.' The count's voice is a throaty rumble. 'I am not done with you yet.'

Will settles his palms against Lecter's bare chest. The contrasts between them are marked - the count is broad-shouldered and hirsute while he is slight and bare - and he likes it. Enjoys feeling small beside this man who is tall and vital and strong.

'Have you oil? Shall I fetch it?'

'Not yet.' He is pulled close, hands cupping his bottom as soft lips brush the curve of his neck. 'I have everything that we need.' It is a purr of sound. 'Everything for your pleasure and for mine. But I want to enjoy you first.' And then, whispered against his temple, 'Quid pro quo, Will. Lie down for me again.'

It is a novelty, this protraction of pleasure. Former lovers have been too intent upon the satiation of their own needs to lavish much attention on Will. He has been a vessel, and a willing one, but this is so much better, and he obeys now unquestioningly, attention rapt on Lecter as the count removes his boots. They thud to the floor, and moments later stockings and breeches follow.

'Now.' Prowling back up the bed, beautiful in his nakedness, Lecter lowers himself atop Will, who parts his thighs in eager accommodation and slides his arms around the count's waist and then up to splay his hands across a wide, warm back. 'How is this?'

'I like it.' Turning his face into Lecter's neck, Will kisses beneath his ear. 'I like having you heavy on top of me.'

'You do, hm?' A hand insinuates between them to rub gently at Will's hard cock until he is keening. Lecter moves then to curve his fingers around one slim thigh, urging it up. 'Wrap your legs around me.'

The gentle rocking that follows creates a most satisfying friction.

'You like this? Is it good?'

'Mm. Ah, ah, yes' As sensation builds again, Will arches his back to increase the pressure and rut more wantonly. 'Oil now.'

'What a demanding boy you are.'

Fingers are pressed to his lips; he parts and then closes around them, eyes on Lecter's as he sucks. But when the fingers are withdrawn, it is only to rub at his nipples - enough, certainly, to have him arching again, murmuring his pleasure, yet serving only to increase his desire for that stretch and fullness which instinct tells him will, from Lecter, be marvellous. Lips and tongue follow, teeth grazing over the sensitized nubs. After long minutes of these unrelenting attentions, Will is panting lightly, and his hands clutch at Lecter's taut bottom, nails digging into flesh.

'What is it that you want?' Lecter's voice is a tease against his skin. 'Tell me, little ladybird. What would you have me do to you now?'

Will pushes up, rubbing their erections together, and pouts. 'You know.'

A tongue flick against a pert nipple. 'I want you to say it.'

'Fuck me,' he whines.

Another lick. 'You could be more polite about it.' And just for good measure, a gentle nip.

Will throws back his head, lips drawn in half-snarl, half-grin. ‘Please fuck me, my lord. Please put your cock in me and fuck me hard and make me come.’

‘Filthy.’ The reproval is sighed against his skin. ‘Downright obnoxious.’

But a shift and a roll, and the count is reaching beneath the bed. Will peers down at the small box that has been retrieved and placed beside them: rosewood inlaid with brass flowers and peacocks. Three small drawers fit snugly into the lower part; Lecter opens the middle one and plucks out a cylindrical glass vial topped with a brass stopper. This he flicks open before commanding softly, ‘Give me your hand.’

The oil is sweetly fragrant. Will rubs it between thumb and forefingers, admiring its golden sheen. ‘Olives?’

‘Of course.’

If only Sutcliffe had been so refined. His preference for cheapness over aesthetics had ever rankled. But now is hardly the time for such comment. Instead, eyes locked with Lecter’s, Will reaches back and begins circling his tight rim, rubbing, dipping, in slow and thorough preparation to take that splendid cock. He is well-practiced, and soon he is moaning in tacit plea.

Fingers trace his parted lips. ‘Are you ready?’

Will smiles, cheeks hot. ‘How would you have me?’

‘On your hands and knees.’ The rough tinge to Lecter’s voice pulls from Will a shudder. *Yes. Yes*. ‘Get up.’

He rolls over and scrambles to comply. A hand at his nape guides his upper body down into a sweeping arc, and he feels Lecter’s cock thrusting between his thighs. He glances down and licks his lips at the sight of the tip peeking out, red and gleaming. Squeezing his legs together, Will begins to rock forward and back.

‘Have you changed your mind?’ Lecter’s voice is uneven, despite the lurking humour.

‘Hardly.’ Mischief spurs Will to say, ‘I want to *enjoy* you first.’

But as much pleasure as is derived from the crudeness of this act - and from the groans that he pulls from the count - it is nothing compared to that which he knows he will feel when they are joined. And so he has no idea of denial when, with an impatient sound, Lecter pulls free to kneel up behind him. There is the scent again of the oil, a sound of slicking skin on skin, and Will feels at last the push and stretch of the count’s cockhead breaching his body. The sting is marvellous; a few involuntary tears drop onto the counterpane and he watches them darken and spread.

There are no words now - only hitched breathing and the occasional grunt of satisfaction. Lecter’s hands are hard on Will’s hips, fingertips pressing in. Will imagines the marks that they will leave and whimpers softly. The sounds increase in pitch and volume as Lecter’s cock is fed into him slowly, and he bites his lip to keep from crying out when he feels the count’s hips flush against his bottom. For a few moments, it is enough merely to feel and adjust, but soon he shifts restlessly.

‘Remain still.’

That voice, deep and rich, resonates through Will, and he drops his head onto his arms in mute obedience. What sensation then follows, as Lecter’s hands sweep up his body and around, to finger

his nipples and stroke his cock back to full hardness. Soon it is impossible not to move, and daring disapproval Will begins a slow undulation - forward into the tunnel of Lecter's fist then back to impale himself fully again. When there is no objection, he increases the pace. As the tightness eases, so his movements quicken, and soon he is grabbed again and pulled almost upright to nestle in Lecter's lap. Lips fasten at his shoulder, sucking hard; a palm presses to his stomach. He reaches back and grasps a handful of thick, silky hair; his head falls back and his cheek presses to Lecter's. Movement like this is reduced almost to imperceptible rocking, but it is most deliciously tormenting: every brush of Lecter's cockhead hits that sweet spot inside that none of Will's past lovers had bothered to find. If on occasion they had chanced upon it, they had shown scant appreciation of Will's pleas for them to linger there. But Lecter - oh, how he ravishes that spot in deliberate, exquisite torment. His hips circle; he thrusts hard then withdraws and thrusts again; he teases and teases until Will is tight as a bow, taut and plucked, skin singing.

'Do not come.'

The warning serves to halt him on the precipice; in retaliation, he lifts himself free entirely and, giggling, drops to the bed and rolls onto his back. Lecter, eyes flashing feral, follows: Will finds his legs seized and concertinaed against his chest.

'What is the matter? I had thought that you wished to stop. That perhaps I was tiring you.'

'Insolent.' The word is hissed, the glowering face of the count hovering over him.

In truth, he cannot wait to be filled again. This is fortunate, for Lecter is now in snarling mood. The count takes himself in hand and shoves home almost brutally. But Will is well-stretched, and he glories in the rough treatment, hands skating over his body, eyelids fluttering closed. He hooks his legs again around Lecter's waist and fists his own cock, ramrod stiff and leaking, as Lecter hammers at his sweet spot, pushing him closer to the brink. Heat suffuses Will's limbs, muscles clench, and as orgasm explodes through him he turns his face into the counterpane to muffle his cries. Above him, harshening breaths and increasingly forceful thrusts signal that Lecter's release too is imminent. There is a swift withdrawal and a bitten back oath. No telltale wetness, though Will is too deep in the hazy aftermath to bother enough to lift his head. What of it that Lecter did not finish inside him? No one ever has.

A hand, surprisingly gentle, passes over his sweat-tinged hair. 'Come. We cannot lie like this.'

He grumbles but allows Lecter to tug him up and lead him from the bedchamber through to the washroom. He is half asleep, limbs lax with lethargy, and so he does not question when Lecter fills a bowl with water from a pitcher and wipes him down with strips of soft muslin. Merely watches, heavy-eyed, looking down at the man who kneels before him silent and intent on his task.

Afterwards, his hand is possessed again. They return not to the count's bedchamber but to the room that Will had occupied the previous night. This time, however, he is handed into a bed already turned down, and there is a warming glow from the grate. Will lies back against the pillow. The flickering of a squat candle on the nightstand casts shadows across Lecter's face as he stands over the bed and returns Will's gaze with unblinking sobriety.

'Shall you sleep in your own bed?'

'Mm hm.' Again, that stroking touch, light against Will's forehead.

Will knows that he should let Lecter go. 'It will not feel nice,' he mumbles, as his lids drift closed. 'Better here.'

‘I am sure.’ But as gentle as is the reply, moments later the connecting door creaks open and then closes again.

Will frowns faintly, and even as exhaustion drags him down into sleep, the discontented little moue remains.

***

‘Good morning, sir.’

A cheerful voice rings out and Will blinks slowly back to consciousness. A slash of sunshine from the sash window falls across his naked backside as the valet, Randall, pulls back the curtains. Will stretches and cracks a yawn. His muscles ache most pleasantly; he smothers a grin in the sheets as he remembers why.

‘His Lordship wishes you to join him for breakfast in the Oak Room in half an hour. And afterwards for riding.’ Brisk and cheerful, Randall lifts a jug from the dressing table and proceeds to fill an accompanying bowl with water. ‘I have taken the liberty of laying out suitable clothes.’

Struggling up onto his elbows, Will scrubs a hand across his face. ‘Thank you, Randall. What is the time?’

‘A quarter past seven, sir.’

‘*Seven*?’

In London, Will had been accustomed to rising at ten, and still the days had dragged. How much worse will it be out here in the middle of precisely nowhere?

‘His Lordship has been always an early riser.’ Randall studies the dresser with a distracted frown. ‘If you would like to freshen yourself, sir, I shall be right back with the tooth powder.’

It is with a resigned sigh that Will sets his feet to the floor and pads over to the dressing table. For modesty’s sake, he grabs his breeches first and thrusts his legs into them, leaving them to hang from his hips as he surveys the various accoutrements that Randall has laid out on the dresser: his toothbrush, soap and comb; the cologne which Sutcliffe had gifted him (in a rare display of good taste) after a particularly good night during which Will had coaxed him to three full-throated orgasms; and a silver box of comfits for the freshening of the breath (although Will much prefers his toothbrush and a robust application of powder over such temporary measures). With a hum of satisfaction, he scoops up the cake of soap and begins his ablutions.

***

The butler greets him at the bottom of the main staircase. Feeling rejuvenated, and smart in a coat of indigo that has seen only a couple of outings, Will is eager to lay eyes again on the man who, the previous night, had given him what was unquestionably the best fucking of his life.

‘Good morning, Chilton. I believe that His Lordship is expecting me.’

‘Indeed he is.’ Perhaps it is Will’s imagination, but Chilton’s brows seem a trifle less severely furrowed than usual, and there is even the suspicion of a twinkle in his green eyes. ‘This way, Mr Graham.’

The Oak Room appears quite different in the morning light. Bright sunshine pours in through a row of windows that overlook a neat lawn fringed by beech hedges. Lecter is seated, though he does not yet appear to have started on the hearty repast that is set before him, and the idea that the count has waited for him has Will preening.

As Will enters, the count rises and bows smartly.

'Good morning, Mr Graham. I hope that you slept well.'

Such polished politeness is a million miles from the snarling, guttural demands that the count had made of Will the previous night. Quelling a grin, Will pulls out a chair and sits down, nodding when the servant in attendance offers tea from a silver pot.

'I have rarely slept better, my lord.' He does not bother to hide the salacious note from his voice. 'In fact, I seem to have worked up quite an appetite.'

'Fortunate, given our itinerary for today.'

The way that Lecter's gaze lingers on him quickens Will's pulse. He shakes out his napkin and murmurs appreciation as a plate of grilled bone, frilly-capped mushrooms and plump tomatoes is set before him.

'Which, according to Randall, is to begin with a ride.'

'I thought that you might enjoy it, and it is by far the best way to see the estate. I have tasked my groom with picking out a mount for you. He has an excellent eye for matching horse to rider.' Lecter pauses mid-slice of his herring. 'I take it you can ride?'

'Of course I can. I had learned how to sit in a saddle almost before I could walk.' Will's answer is a tad snappish but really, how gauche does the count think him to be?

Other than a slightly raised eyebrow, Lecter allows the slip, and Will falls to attacking his meal with gusto. Already, he is mightily pleased with his new position, and he is determined to be pleasing in return. His province is, of course, to be one of shadows. Adapting always to his lover's moods, bowing to his every whim. By day, he will act as accommodating and lively companion. By evening, entertaining guest. But the nights - oh, the nights he will own. *Lecter* he will own. Even now, the mere idea of the dark hours that lie ahead - in all of their wondrous possibilities and undoubted pleasures - shivers through him.

That delicious glow of anticipation lasts for the duration of the meal, and it lingers as Will dons hat and greatcoat to accompany Lecter outside. The breeze is warm on his face; and when halfway up the hill he stops and turns to survey the house, the sun reflects off the gold leaf trim of the windows, sparkling flirtatiously.

'You have a beautiful house,' he allows.

So many grand estates that he has visited seem to exist primarily as soulless monuments or vulgar trophies, yet this one manages to both invite and impress.

'It is my home.' The emphasis is quietly tender. 'And it is the work of many generations. I am but the latest.'

The latest but not, surely, the last. At the ball, Will had overheard a gaggle of ladies sighing over *the dashing young count of four-and-twenty* who showed no signs of choosing a spouse. And yet why

would he? As unfair as it is, the fact remains that society favours early marriage for women while men are encouraged to spread their wings - if not their seed - until nearer to thirty. Still, Lecter will be expected to make a dynastic marriage someday soon. Briefly, Will wonders whether Lady Margot is in line for the position, but the thought is irksome and quickly he dismisses it.

'You have great plans of your own from what I have heard.'

Lecter turns from his perusal of the house. 'Ah yes. The rumours began almost on the day of my inheritance that I would tear the place apart and have it relaid brick by brick in homage to my own tastes.'

'You have added to it,' Will points out, although he is as scornful of the wilder gossip as is the count. 'An entire wing, is not that right?'

'To house my collections.' Lecter glances at him. 'I will give you a tour this afternoon, if you like. I would be interested to hear your opinion of my latest acquisition.'

'I would be interested to see it.'

As they resume their walk up to the stable block, Will finds himself drifting closer to the count until their hands brush occasionally. Such a simple act of intimacy is strangely thrilling, and by the time they have gained the summit Will's cheeks are hot with more than physical exertion.

But then they pass beneath the clock tower. And there before them is the freckle-faced stable hand - who, the previous day, had been pressed moaning between Lecter and a stall door - smirking now as though in expectation of a repeat performance.

'Good morning, my lord. Mr Franklyn brought word earlier that you want Clarence today.'

'Indeed.' Lecter's smile - that same lazily seductive lilt of lips that had the power to make Will feel *special* and *wanted* - is directed now at the *fucking* stable hand. 'How is his mood this morning, Fred?'

'Oh, he is fair excited, but he will soon calm down once he has you atop him, sir.'

Fred smirks again, his eyes fixed on Lecter. There is a hunger within that Will recognises well. His hands curl slowly into fists.

'Very good. Is he ready for me, Fred?'

'I believe so, sir. I shall just go and check.'

And with a saucy parting look at his master, the impudent stable hand disappears into the adjacent wing.

Lecter deigns finally to return his attention to Will, but before he can speak, Will addresses him in scornful tones.

'I assume that Clarence is a horse. Or do your stable hands take turns servicing you?'

Fair brows rise, but there is little other reaction, and Lecter's reply is mild. 'Now there is a thought.'

This does little to diminish Will's pique. '*I* had thought you of a mind to be agreeable to *me*, my lord. Or have you forgot that promise already?'

He knows that he is behaving badly, like a brattish child teetering on the edge of tantrum. There is no question that Clarence is one of the count's horses - even now, the clink of tack and the creaking of a stall door advertise his imminent emergence from the shaded wing. But seeing the stable hand again - witnessing his covetousness, the cocksure attitude that is bolstered by his intimate connection to the count, knowing that less than twenty-four hours ago it was *his* willing body that Lecter was fucking into - has triggered in Will a feeling of insecurity that enrages him by its very existence. *He* is the one who has been always the pursued, the desired, the object of men's lavish attentions. Forgetting in his petulance that only minutes ago he was, in fact, feeling very *much* desired, Will kicks the cobbles and scowls.

'I have forgotten nothing.' The softness in Lecter's voice is tempered now by steel. 'It is you, my boy, who seems to be forgetting yourself. Now mind your tongue while I speak with my head groom.'

Will considers sourly whether to risk further wrath by sticking *out* his tongue. But then, emerging into the streaked sunlight, comes another man, this one older and definitively plainer, leading a black stallion. Will recalls with some discomfort that the previous day he had passed the very same man and dismissed him as a candidate for an easy fuck because of the ordinariness of his looks. Yet, upon closer inspection, the groom's down-to-earth mien and calm brown eyes are a hundred times more appealing than the sly, shifting expressions of the rudely handsome Fred.

'Ah, Franklyn, good.' Lecter is back to business, although Will doubts that he has heard the last of the matter. 'And have you found a horse for Mr Graham?'

'Aye, sir.' Franklyn acknowledges Will with a respectful bob of the head. 'I thought that Star might suit Mr Graham. Fred is bringing him out now.'

Lecter looks Will up and down, causing him to bristle anew. 'Good choice, Franklyn. Yes, Star will do very well.'

Star, it turns out, is a placid grey of average stature. A pleasant enough equine but rather staid in comparison to the highly-strung Clarence, who demonstrates with flared nostrils and high whinnies his appreciation for the freshening breeze and green spaces as they gallop across open fields, flanked on one side by a gently winding river and on the other by wooded hills. Still, there is enough of beauty to absorb that Will can forgive the choosing of an unadventurous mount. Green he is used to - growing up in Bath, he was surrounded by it - but the rugged hills of Derbyshire are altogether fascinating to him. They ride hard along the river, until eventually a boundary wall looms before them, and Will follows Lecter in turning his mount.

On the return journey, Will notices rising through the trees of the hilly range now on their left an elegant structure of sand-coloured stone topped by four domed turrets, and he slows to study it.

'Is that a hunting tower?'

'It is.' Lecter circles back to pull alongside him, Clarence pawing impatiently at the turf. 'The Third Count commissioned it in the late seventeenth century. It offers unparalleled views of the estate, and the ladies of the house would use it to watch the hunting from a position of comfort. It operates now mainly as a summerhouse. Would you care to see it?'

'Some time.' Will finds that he is suddenly far more interested in the immediate view. Hair wind-tousled and complexion bright, Hannibal Lecter is a picture of vital masculinity. 'The Third Count, you say? And you are the Eighth. At what point in time did your family settle over here?'

Lecter grins. ‘Ah yes, our family title can create something of a confusion. It was the Third Count who was gifted the land, on one of his trips to visit his good friend, William of Orange. I believe that it had been his intention to use the place as a winter retreat - believe it or not, English winters are positively balmy in comparison with those which my ancestors suffered through in Lithuania. But when he saw the finished house, he fell so much in love with it that he moved the entire family over to England. We have still an estate near Vilnius but I have visited it only a handful of times. My life is here.’

As much as Will craves the authoritarian side of this man, who sees through his nonsense and knows exactly how to hold him fast where others had always bowed to his petulance, he is drawn also to the boy who is not so very much older than himself. And suddenly, waiting until night to touch him again seems unconscionable.

‘May we stop for a while? Rest the horses before we return them?’

‘Of course.’ Lecter points to a nearby grove of trees, beneath which is set a bench hewn from a felled oak. ‘Over there. The shade will do very well for them.’

They dismount beneath silver birch, removing their hats and greatcoats to hang them from low branches, and once the horses are secured they sit side by side on the smooth bench seat that overlooks the river and rolling fields beyond. All is quiet and yet the very air seems alive with activity: the susurrus of gently flowing water, geese honking overhead, insect vibrations and the trembling of wildflowers beneath their eager attentions.

His sense of well-being restored, ruffled feelings soothed by the exhilarating ride, Will seeks a way to phrase what he knows is an overdue apology. The beauty of the morning has him casting about for a way to extract any remaining awkwardness between them, like unwanted clouds in a blue sky. But even as he frames a thought and opens his mouth to express it, he is distracted by the sight of Lecter tugging off first one muddied boot and then the other.

‘My lord?’

‘It just so happens,’ says Lecter, continuing to remove articles of clothing with blithe unconcern for Will’s stares, ‘that this is my favourite stretch of river. Care to know why?’

‘Oh, I am all ears.’

For this, he receives a slow smile that warms the tips of said ears.

‘The bend just in front of us,’ continues Lecter, pulling free the bow of his cravat, ‘slows the current, that one may swim without fear of falling into danger. And it is far enough removed from the house to ensure privacy,’ peeling his shirt off over his head in one smooth motion, ‘thus preserving one’s modesty while saving one’s clothes from an unnecessary drenching.’

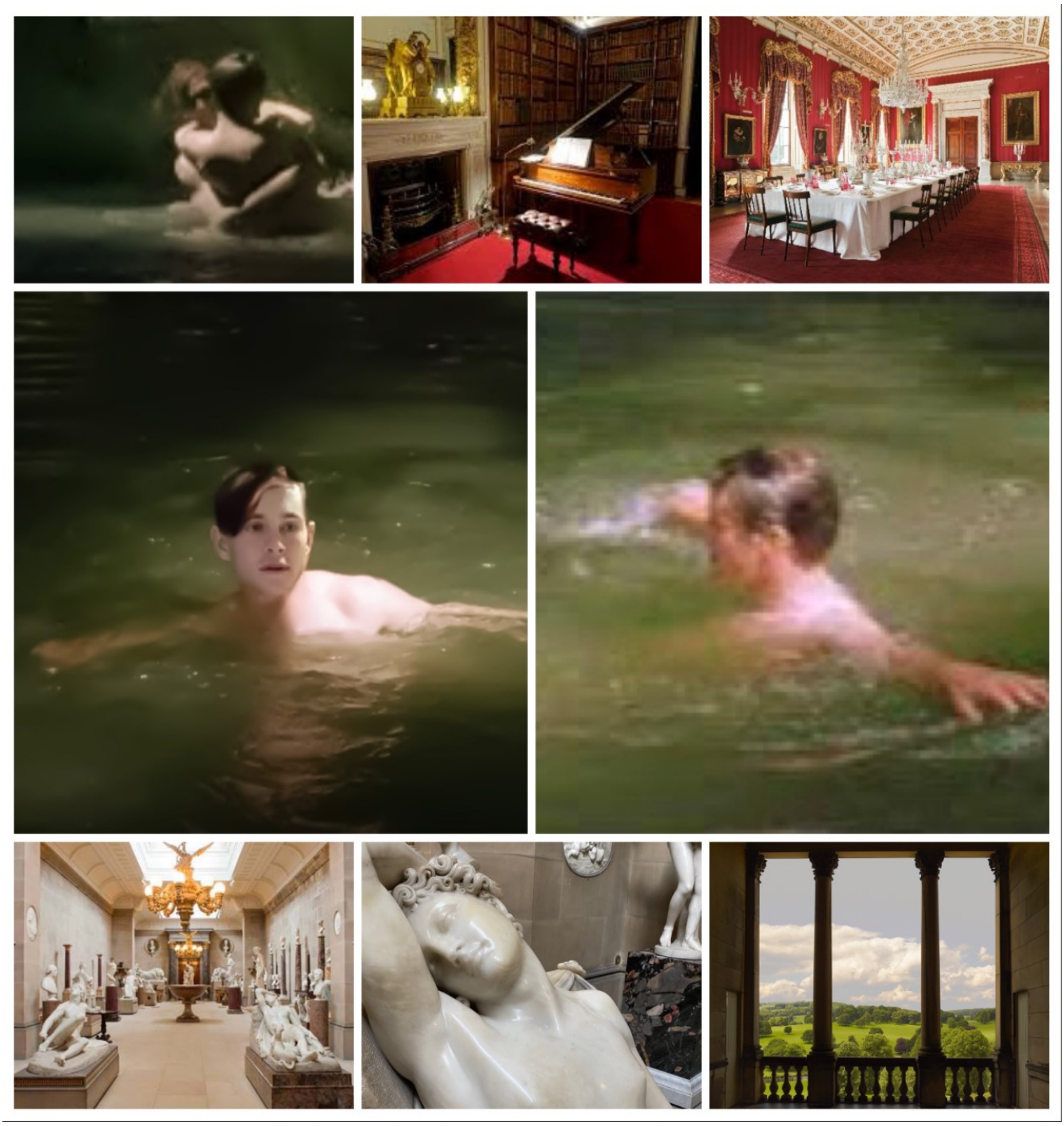
‘I see.’ Although it is impossible to spare the *river* so much as a glance at this present moment.

‘I do hope so.’ Stepping out of his breeches and stripping off his stockings, Lecter stands and stretches, as commanding in this state of déshabillé as he was at Almack’s in full regalia. He turns to Will, hands on hips, looking fiercely, damnably attractive, and raises one imperious brow. ‘Well? Are you game?’

And then he is off, striding away in all of his unselfconscious magnificence, leaving Will to fumble at his own clothing, floundering and eager, feeling yet again that abandonment of all that he has learned,

uncouth in the face of the count’s manifold attractions.

Plaything of a god



The water is silk on Hannibal's skin as he floats, face upturned to the sun, waiting for the disturbance that tells him Will has taken up his challenge. He is thrumming with expectation, knowing full well that this impulse has sprung as much from a need to have the boy again as from any desire to cool off from their ride. It is quite extraordinary how close to the surface his desire for Will runs. What has it been? All of ten hours since he was buried in him to the hilt? Yet back at the stables, he had *ached* for him. With every deliciously naughty pout, every caustic remark, every disdainful glance. And then witnessing the boy's elation at the thud of hooves on churned turf, the whipping breeze casting his curls back in a stream of black… Such wild beauty Hannibal has never before seen.

Little wonder he has seized this opportunity so fortuitously granted. Little wonder his cock bobs eagerly against his thigh.

But almost as if he has sensed Hannibal's lascivious thoughts and decided to foil his intentions, Will enters the water at a point further downstream. The first hint of this is a tinkling laugh and a short gasp. Then comes floating on the breeze the observation, 'It is colder than it looks.'

'The water is perfectly warm over here.'

This is not strictly true, but closer to the bank it is far from cold, and having Will frolicking well out of reach (*teasing wretch!*) does not suit Hannibal at all.

When there is no immediate response, he opens his eyes on a sigh and turns his head to locate the boy. Will, too, is floating - a pale little nymph against weed-clogged darkness. He appears suddenly alarmingly vulnerable.

'Come into the shallows.'

Hannibal tells himself that this order has everything to do with his determination to slake his lust, yet when Will fails to respond, tension sharpens his voice.

'Will. Do you hear me?'

Thin arms trail outwards in the water, tracing shapes, making ripples. 'Who within a mile could not?' The little demon sounds amused.

'*Will*.'

'Oh my.' Tipping upright, Will shakes the water from his hair and swims with graceful arcing strokes to where Hannibal now stands, waist-deep. 'Am I in trouble, my lord?'

'You might have been, had the current decided to take you.'

It is quite difficult to remain stern now that the danger - or at least the perception of such - has passed, and when blue eyes twinkle so at him, but Hannibal does his best, directing at the miscreant a forbidding frown. Until the boy launches at him and tugs his hair and curls suddenly gentle hands around his neck.

'Were you worried about me?' croons Will, outrageous and beguiling in his mockery.

His legs fasten around Hannibal's waist, and Hannibal secures his charge with hands that cup the firm curves of the boy's backside.

'Not at all,' he replies crisply. 'I am simply unused to having my orders ignored, that is all.'

Will tips his head back consideringly. 'Well, now that I have obeyed you in this, what is your next command, my lord?'

But Hannibal is too distracted to reply. By the tiny droplets of water that glitter like diamonds on Will's skin, and the dripping curls that hang long, brushing almost to his collarbones, and the weight of the boy, and the slide of their skin, and the scents of mutual arousal that not even the multitudinous fragrances of nature can hide. He looks down and sees the red tip of Will's cock peeking out of the water. Groaning, he crushes him closer and sucks a kiss into the juncture of neck and shoulder, while below the water his fingers stroke the crease between Will's buttocks. The boy, head thrown back,

murmurs encouragement, and so boldly he presses in and penetrates with his middle finger hot, tight darkness. He sucks harder, tasting the river and sunshine and *Will*, and circles with his finger, crooking it and stroking insistently that little hidden bud of pleasure. Teeth fasten on his own neck, grazing, small tongue laving, and he shudders his delight, lids falling heavy. Immersed in dragging warmth, they mouth at each other and rock gently together in this way until breathing becomes rapid and muscles tighten at crucial points. And when he can bear to wait no longer, Hannibal takes himself in hand and positions himself at Will's entrance, teasing light pressure. Their eyes meet and he smiles almost cruelly.

'Ask me for it.'

There is a flicker of surprise and the faintest trace of resentment in eyes blown almost black. Perhaps such behaviour is beneath him, but Hannibal throbs with the need to know that this is not just a case of the master having his way with a subordinate. Pride demands that Will wants *him* just as fiercely. He watches, waits, until Will's expression softens to needfulness, and he strokes gentle fingers across the seam of Hannibal's lips.

'Please, my lord. Fuck me.'

Hannibal shapes a languid smile to the pads of those fingertips and slowly eases himself inside. When he is seated fully, he drops his forehead to press against the boy's shoulder. Legs planted wide apart, it is difficult to move much in this position without fear of tipping them both over. Yet merely being milked by the boy's strong muscles is a pleasure he would not give up. Will squeezes around him in rhythmic pulls, and Hannibal groans his appreciation.

'You enjoy being filled, do not you?'

'Mm.' Will leans into him, hips undulating. 'You are so big. I can feel you everywhere.'

The clever thing is using the weightlessness of the water to pleasure himself on Hannibal's cock. It is slow and perfect, and Hannibal closes his hand around Will's swollen length, stroking him steadily, lifting his head to watch the spreading flush across Will's cheeks, down the graceful column of his neck, and over his chest. Little nipples are puckered and tight: Hannibal puts his mouth to one and kisses sloppily. Then the other. Tasting the sweetness of the boy's skin, enjoying the tautness of each tiny berry-like nipple against his tongue. And all the while, he strokes Will's cock harder and faster, until the tip is shiny and slick, and the boy is jerking against him, all coordination gone.

'Uh uh.' Hannibal removes his hand and ignores Will's whining objection, to secure the boy once more tightly against him. 'You shall not come until I have given you a *proper* fucking.' And he strides from the water, urgency lending surety to his steps.

The spongy grass gives way to their combined weight as he lowers them down, still connected. Will, framed now by moss and clover, sighs and bites his lower lip as Hannibal withdraws almost all the way. His eyes are fixed on that pretty mouth, and when he slams home again he moves to crush it beneath his own. But Will shifts, restless, and turns his cheek to the grass. For an instant, Hannibal falters. It had been deliberate, then, the boy's avoidance of his kiss the previous evening. But he is too far gone to driving need to react with more than a huff of displeasure, and he rises to his knees, grabbing the boy's slight waist, impaling him again and again until his lithe body stiffens in an arc, and creamy release shoots pulsing into the air. In a few short thrusts, Hannibal too feels the ecstasy of climax, but rather than withdraw he drives deep and spills inside the boy with harsh panting sighs.

For a few moments afterwards, neither move. Then carefully, Hannibal slips free. He feels heat staining his cheeks. Never has he finished inside anyone before. And he is fairly certain that he should

have asked first.

‘My apologies.’ His voice is gruff as he forces himself to meet Will’s gaze.

‘No need.’ Will just looks up at him, expression slightly dazed. ‘It felt - nice. Warm.’

A peculiar tenderness twists inside Hannibal at this, and he brushes the backs of his fingers against Will’s hot cheek. ‘Ridiculous boy.’

A hand snares his arm to tug at him. ‘Rest with me awhile.’

Willingly he goes, careful to ease his weight down, until he is lying between Will’s spread thighs, head pillowed on Will’s chest, cheek to skin. He listens as the thud of the boy’s heart slows gradually, and closes his eyes. Just for a few moments, he thinks, and promptly falls asleep.

***

Waking is a discovery by degrees. One, it has clouded over, although the air is heavy still with drowsy warmth. It is possible that a storm is coming. Two, they have shifted in slumber, and Hannibal’s head rests now on Will’s flat belly. He turns his face into the boy, inhaling river-washed skin stripped of all artifice, and kisses soft above his belly button.

A slight murmur draws his attention upwards, to a pair of sleepy blue eyes. It would take the merest shift to bring him into contact with the boy’s cock, twitching semi-hard already. He moves, just a little, to rub his cheek against it, then licks a broad stripe to its tip. He looks up again, admiring the slashes of colour that his efforts have wrought on apple-round cheeks.

‘Shall I continue?’

Will grins. ‘If I may participate.’

Hannibal watches, bemused, as Will sits up with a pleased hum, leans forward and crawls towards him... *Ah*. Obligingly, Hannibal turns onto his side. And within moments, a hungry little tongue is lapping at his cock. It would be easy to lie back and give himself over totally to the pleasure that he is receiving. But then would not that be terribly rude? So he settles to his previous task, and soon the air is filled with debauched sounds of slurping and deep-throated moans. Will’s cock is pleasingly slim in girth, and what delight it is to torment with strong sucks and long pulls that rigid member. Particularly when the result is a potent feverishness of reciprocation. Hannibal is significantly bigger, but that does not prevent his young lover from taking eagerly as much as he can fit into that cupid’s bow mouth. And when he presses *just so* with his tongue…

‘*Gods*.’ In retribution, Hannibal penetrates the boy with two fingers, thrusting deep as he swallows him down again. It is an easy slide after their recent coupling, and the little inner nub is slick with his own spend as he rubs it in ruthless circles.

Will pulls off him with a gasping sob as he comes, and Hannibal continues to suckle until his own climax tears through him, painting white the boy’s chin and dripping onto the grass below.

They break apart, lying on their backs, chests heaving in tandem. Fingers slot between Hannibal’s and he closes his hand around them.

‘We should go back. Chilton will throw a fit if we miss luncheon.’

‘We cannot go back like this,’ points out Will. His voice is a little hoarse, and Hannibal frowns even as part of him is secretly, basely pleased.

‘You need to take greater care, little ladybird. I would not have you damage yourself for my pleasure.’

‘It was my pleasure, too.’

They share a grin.

‘Come.’ Hannibal stands and tugs the boy to his feet. ‘A quick bathe and then back we go.’

‘And after luncheon, shall you show me your collections?’

It is gratifying that Will has remembered. Hannibal rewards him with a smile and a caress down his delicate spine. ‘Of course, if you wish.’

This time, they bathe apart.

How long it has been since he was so sexually ravenous, Hannibal cannot remember. Probably it hails back to his boyhood, and the year he was just entering that first giddy swell of awareness, when his father’s handsome groom had caught his eyes upon him, curious, innocently hungry, and had one sultry summer evening drawn him up into the hayloft with whispered promises to take him apart and teach him what it was to derive pleasure from another human being. Hannibal had been insatiable, precocious, demanding in his lessons.

After they had been discovered, and the groom summarily dismissed, he had been left to continue his education alone. Always he had remembered how to take; rarely had he concerned himself with giving. Until Will. Based on the few encounters they have had so far, Hannibal has come to the incredulous realisation that drawing squirms and whimpers and cries of pleasure from this boy only increases his own arousal.

But as enjoyable as their shared intimacies are proving, such intensity of feeling cannot last. It is a novelty, the boy a trinket - and Hannibal merely the latest in line to take possession. To forget that fact would be folly indeed.

He allows himself to slip back into friendly formality as they converse while dressing, and although he feels Will’s questioning gaze on him once or twice, he does not answer it.

The ride back is polite, sedate. At the stables, they hand over the horses to Franklyn, then stroll back down to the house where they find Chilton waiting in the Oak Room with a prodigious spread of cold cuts, bread, cheeses from the farms, and freshly-picked tomatoes from the glasshouse.

***

‘What else do you grow here?’ Will takes another bite of tomato, and crunches with obvious enjoyment.

Endeavouring not to stare at lips stained red with juice, Hannibal hefts down more wine. ‘We are having some success with pineapples.’

‘Pineapples?’ It is quite endearing how round Will’s eyes grow. ‘I have seen them only in pictures.’

Hannibal makes a mental note to request pineapple for the dinner table as soon as the first crop is ready. ‘And my new head gardener is cultivating an orangery. You might like to explore the

glasshouses when we take a tour of the gardens. Perhaps early tomorrow, before the sun is too high.'

Will is nodding eagerly. 'And this afternoon you will show me the North Wing?'

'Directly after we have finished here.'

It is touching, this decided interest in his home, his life. And again, Hannibal feels a strong pull towards the bright-eyed, quick-witted boy who sits now with one knee drawn up against his chest, stockinged foot tucked beneath his thigh, boots abandoned beneath the table.

'I do not recommend walking around unshod, however,' he adds pointedly, torn between perturbation and being charmed by the careless way in which Will has made himself so entirely at home. 'The floors can be very slippery.'

'You could always carry me.' And the little rogue winks before helping himself to a hearty slice of bread.

This gentle teasing continues through to coffee; and despite his earlier resolution to carve between them a more rigid propriety, Hannibal cannot help but respond. No matter the circumstance or the boy's less than salubrious past, he is an entertaining and intelligent companion, able to converse easily on a myriad of topics. And then there is the not inconsequential matter of his beauty, a dark sultriness which surely George Romney himself would have begged to commit to canvas, had he lived to meet the boy.

Waxing rhapsodic, even in his mind, is hardly helpful.

So it is that when luncheon is over, Hannibal embarks on their tour with a determination to treat Will just as he would any visiting guest. He does not go out of his way to put physical distance between them: such a move would be crass and missish, particularly given their morning intimacies. Rather, he keeps the boy at bay with rehearsed phrases.

'Wyatville's design for the North Wing borrowed from Vanvitelli, particularly with regard to the inclusion of a terminating belvedere… The wing runs for four hundred feet, end to end… See here a sketch by Caravaggio, believed to be a self-portrait…'

Yet far from appearing offended by such persistent formality, Will listens with rapt attentiveness, firing back questions that are sometimes downright technical. It begs the question…

'What exactly has been your schooling? Clearly you have had some.'

'I am glad that it shows,' comes back the pert reply. 'In truth, I had an indifferent tutor for several years of my childhood, but Eton managed to instil some learning in me. I boarded there from the age of thirteen until Christmas last.'

Curious. Most of the boys who are passed between wealthy lovers hail from obscure backgrounds to say the least. Some cannot even read. Yet Will has been in receipt of an education usually reserved for the sons of the most affluent. An education cut short for reasons which clearly are not about to be shared. And there is something else that shifts Hannibal's perception of the boy. If indeed he has been out in society only since December, then the life of wantonness and hedonism from which Margot plucked him was of relatively short duration. The list of rivals which Hannibal has been imagining may not, after all, be legion. That thought ignites a spark of hot satisfaction. He decides against pursuing the topic at present - the faint lines marring Will's brow speak of an unhappy tension that Hannibal would not see increased - but he is resolved to know it all in time.

They climb the oak staircase up which Will had snuck two nights since, and when they round the corner into the music parlour and find themselves greeted by a footman with a tray of drinks, Hannibal is jolted out of musings on his young lover's mysterious past.

'This will be Chilton's doing,' he confides dryly, handing a glass to Will who murmurs his thanks and wanders across to the pianoforte.

'He looks after you.'

There is something almost plaintive in the observation. Hannibal dismisses the servant and crosses to where Will has seated himself at the instrument.

'Move over.' He takes a seat beside him and tastes the wine. It is sweet on his tongue. 'Do you play?'

'Sometimes.'

There it is again - that strangely melancholic quality. Hannibal decides that he does not like it. It does not suit the boy to be so subdued. Previous intentions forgotten, he lays a hand upon Will's thigh and spreads his fingers in subtle caress.

'Play for me.'

The faintest tremor ripples through that slender form before Will squares his shoulders and flexes his fingers. 'What would you like to hear?'

'I have been always partial to Mozart.'

'Well, then.'

A hint of a smile lights Will's eyes, and moments later the opening bars of Mozart's Piano Sonata Number Sixteen fill the sombre silence. Hannibal watches the boy's fingers fairly fly across the keyboard, coaxing vivacity from the staid old instrument. It is a joyous sound, and he is transported back to another time, when his mother, on one of her infrequent visits, had sat beside him playing the very same piece. For a moment, the air is heavy with the scent of roses. And then he blinks, and the scent fades with the memory.

The first movement comes to a decisive finish and he squeezes Will's thigh lightly before lifting his hand away. 'It seems that Eton did indeed have something to offer.'

Will shrugs, a careless motion yet effortlessly graceful. He picks up his wine glass and sips contemplatively. 'My ability to play Mozart with some little skill will hardly change the world, although I suppose it renders me useful at dinner parties.'

'I would say that you have far more to offer than mere musical accomplishment.'

This protestation threatens to lead them down a dangerous path, a fact evidently not lost on Will, who smirks into his glass. Hastily, Hannibal rises from the piano bench.

'Let us continue with our tour.'

At the threshold of the lavish dining room that was the scene of their first proper intimacy, he pauses, allowing Will to precede him. The long table that dominates is, as always, set with the finest silver. Eighteen seats, although at capacity it will hold twenty with ease.

‘This is where the new wing begins.’

‘A memorable location,’ murmurs Will, darting at Hannibal a mischievous glance as he strolls down the room, fingers trailing along the backs of carved walnut chairs. ‘How often do you use it for dining?’

Valiantly ignoring the subtle inflection, Hannibal makes an invisible adjustment to the nearest place setting.

‘Five, perhaps six, times a year. It depends. Parties at Lecter House are generally larger than the room can accommodate. It is easier to use the state rooms on the other side of the house for evening dining.’

‘It seems a pity.’ Keen eyes survey the vaulted coffered ceiling, ornamented with gold leaf, from the centre of which hangs an enormous crystal chandelier. ‘Such excess is surely better shared.’

‘Perhaps we can remedy the situation by holding a small dinner here. What say you to Midsummer’s Eve?’ Hannibal gestures for Will to accompany him through into the next room. ‘It would be a chance for you to meet my near neighbours.’

He is barely aware of the significance of his words until Will reminds him, ‘Midsummer is full a month from now.’

‘Little enough time to plan so large an enterprise.’

That is not, of course, Will’s meaning, but to discuss trial periods and the like seems crass at such a moment. Besides, is there any doubt that he means to keep the boy, at least until he has had a sufficiency of him? There is little doubt that such a time will come - to imagine otherwise would be absurdly romantic, and Hannibal has seen enough of the world to be wisely immune from such self-delusion. Still, there is the faintest edge of dissatisfaction at the idea of releasing Will to another lover, and briskly he dismisses the train of thought, determined not to fall into the repulsive trap of *mooning*.

As they pass through the next vestibule, Hannibal slows his steps. This final room is his personal joy - the project closest to his heart - and a strange nervousness has him lagging behind. If Will should look and see only vanity...

‘Oh.’

As a sound it is little enough, but it is all that Hannibal needs as reassurance. For Will has turned to him with widened eyes.

‘Lost for words?’

Will offers only a tremulous smile, and as they move further into the room Hannibal endeavours to see it through the boy’s eyes. A vast rectangular space flanked by walls of pale gritstone. Above, a series of skylights punctuated by chandeliers of gold leaf. And against this simple backdrop, rows of statuary: the designs classical, mythological in aspect, yet each a work of modernity that tells an age-old tale. Venus, Mars, Cupid, Ganymede, Achilles…

Will has paused before a figure of a young man in repose, one arm slung carelessly above his head, naked but for a delicately draped sheet.

‘*Endymion sleeping*.’ Hannibal comes to stand beside Will, gaze flitting between the boy and the sculpture. ‘You look a little like, I think.’

‘A shepherd boy?’ scoffs Will. ‘The plaything of a god?’

‘A beauty.’ Softly, raising his hand to stroke Will’s nape, fingers twining into curls of richest ebony. ‘The object of a god’s ravaging desire.’

‘A mixed blessing, to be sure.’

Hannibal grins. ‘You consider the prospect of a god’s attentions wearisome? How very particular of you.’

A graceful turn brings Will close in his space, hands curling around his coat lapels. ‘I do not consider the prospect of *your* attentions wearisome.’ His tone is wheedling, playful. Unmistakable in intent.

Hannibal tuts. ‘Sluttish boy. Have not you had enough for one day?’

Out pops the lower lip in a delightful pout. ‘I wish only to service your needs, my lord.’

‘Which you have done admirably thus far.’ It is alarmingly easy to imagine commanding the boy to his knees right here. Hannibal releases him with reluctance. ‘But permit me at least a few hours’ grace before you begin again.’

He resumes walking and Will falls into step beside him, manner still endearingly coltish. ‘Why? Are you afraid that I might tire you out?’

Or become indispensable…

‘Undoubtedly.’ At the rear door, Hannibal turns to survey the room. ‘So what do you think of my collection? It is a work in progress, of course.’

‘I think it wonderful.’ Earnest eyes meet his. ‘Have you been often in Italy? So much of what you have created here reminds me of drawings I have seen of Florence and Rome.’

‘You have an acute eye. I stayed in Florence the summer of my eighteenth year, and I have visited the country a few times since.’ Hannibal shakes his head, wry. ‘Though never for long enough. Time is a precious commodity when you have a legacy to maintain. It was in Rome that I met the sculptor who created my Endymion. He is working currently on a pair of rutting stags.’

‘How marvellous. But you should commission also something of yourself. A bust, perhaps, in the fashion of one of the Roman emperors.’

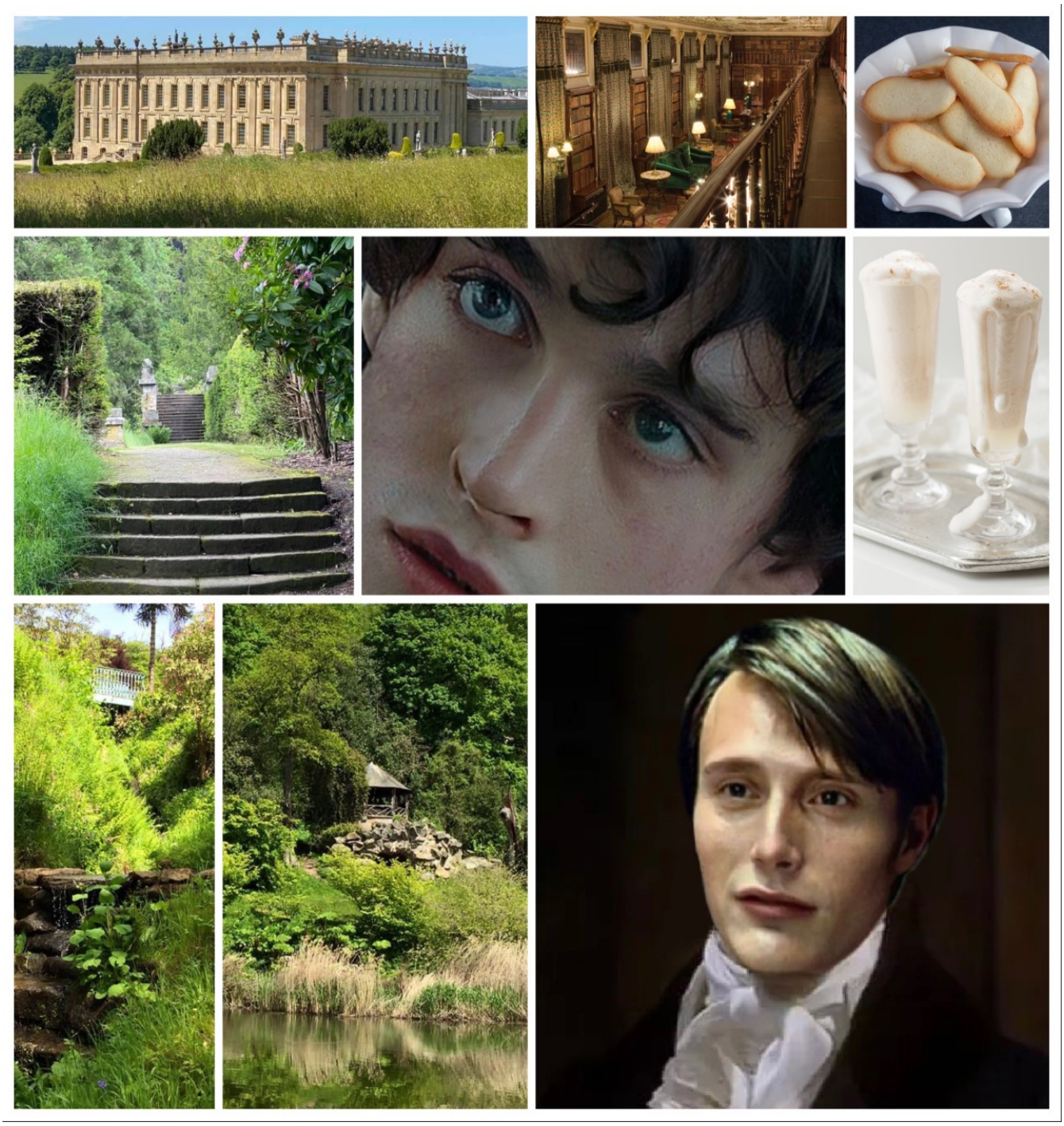
Will is commendably straight-faced as he suggests this, but it does give Hannibal the glint of an idea, and for several entirely pleasant moments he imagines *Will’s* likeness captured, supine, in white marble.

They walk through to the orangery, a ferned and fragrant space in which statuary and flora coexist in a miniature tropical Paradise. From here, one may turn right out into the garden or left into the belvedere, which on its ground floor houses the estate office. Above, via a winding flight of stone steps, the top of the tower offers access to views across all sides of the valley, and it is here that Hannibal decides to finish their tour of the house.

Up high in the cool shade of cream stone, there is barely a whisper of breeze, and the panoramic spread of fields and woodland is as a rendering in pastels - smudged greens and browns, with the occasional squat farm building or flock of dotted white sheep. The river dissects this pastoral scene, a rippling ribbon of blue. And near the water’s edge, as if directed by some celestial hand to complete

the picturesque, a herd of red deer graze peacefully. Hannibal squeezes Will's shoulder when he sees them, directing the boy's gaze. And when, with an almost imperceptible sigh, Will leans back against him, Hannibal finds himself floating once more.

Country air



It quickly becomes apparent that a single day is a wholly inadequate amount of time in which to explore the estate. The enclosed garden alone is a veritable maze of hidden walks and unexpected treasures. Lecter explains that the main route involves a walk of at least three hours' duration, and although Will protests that he is prepared for such a challenge, by the time they are halfway around his feet are sore and his coat dust-grimed.

They have ventured onto the edge of a shaded valley: below them is a tangle of rhododendrons in full bursts of colour, from gaudy purple to blood red, while before them wends a rocky pathway

interrupted by a small wrought iron bridge. It spans a gully down which water gushes, clear and sparkling in the May sunshine. Will looks up, shading his eyes, seeking the source, but from this vantage it is impossible to see what lies at the top of the hill.

Lecter, meanwhile, has started down another track, which diverges from their present path just before the bridge. He pauses when Will fails to follow.

‘Is something the matter?’

‘Not at all. Only - cannot we go that way?’ Will points to the craggy hillside, a tumble of rocks and moss, through which is threaded an upwards-leading path.

‘You wish to take the harder route?’ Lecter’s mouth quirks, yet curiously he seems reluctant. ‘It will add at least a half hour to our excursion, and we have brought no refreshment.’

‘No matter. There is a stream at hand. That will suffice.’

And there it is again - a strange hesitation. ‘I do not think - oh, very well.’

There is something almost grim about this acquiescence, and Will puzzles over Lecter’s change of mood as the count doubles back to accompany him across the bridge. Halfway up the winding pathway, they stop and squat down to avail themselves of the waters which tinkle merrily over sun-warmed rock. Will drinks half a dozen scoopfuls before he sits back on his heels and wipes his mouth with the back of his hand.

‘The water here is as pure as any I have tasted at Bath.’

‘We have similar medicinal springs hereabouts.’ For a moment, Lecter’s aspect lightens. ‘I shall take you to the baths at Matlock and you can compare them for yourself.’

But as they recommence their walk, he seems once more plunged into introspection. At the top of the steep ascent, an unexpected vista unfurls of a large pond, reed-fringed, overlooked by a circular structure of stone and wood on the bank opposite. It is festooned with climbing roses, a halo of white against a wooded backdrop.

‘Is that a viewing platform?’

‘A bandstand. Built by my father for my mother. Unfortunately, dry rot has rendered it unsafe.’

Will cannot detect much regret in this statement but instinct - and the curtness of Lecter’s tone - tells him to enquire no further. And so he merely comments, ‘A pity. The view must be wonderful.’

‘Come, I shall show you the site where I intend to establish a pinetum.’

With one final curious glance backwards, Will follows Lecter away from the pond, feeling the tension slip from his companion with every step. But whatever was troubling him, Will will not add to his discomfort by prying. He allows all questions to slide from his mind and inhales the sweet fragrances of pine and sun-warmed earth. Out here, enclosed by trees, canopied by blue, it could be another world. All is softness and dappled light. And there is even more to be enchanted by as Lecter begins telling him of his plans for the garden. A rockery, an arboretum, a great glasshouse so tall that trees may be grown inside it. The animation of his countenance renders him exceedingly handsome, and not for the first time Will wonders that such a man should be single still.

When at length they are in sight once more of the house, Will tugs hs guide to a stop on the bank of the rolling lawn that he had viewed first from the dining room windows on the night of the masquerade.

‘May we sit here for a while?’

‘Of course.’ Lecter regards him quizzically. ‘Although if you are fatigued, there are chairs enough in the house.’

Will chooses a clover-strewn spot and sinks down with a sigh. ‘No doubt, but I should like to enjoy the sun on my face for a few minutes more.’

Lecter joins him, chuckling. ‘From the look of it, you have had quite enough sun. Lady Margot will rightly scold me when she sees you.’

The press of Lecter’s thigh against his own is a pleasing weight. Will half closes his eyes, lifting his face to the rogue sun.

‘Are the Vergers joining us for dinner?’

‘Not tonight. You shall have to make do with just me, I fear.’

This last is breathed against his temple, and Will enjoys the consequent anticipatory shiver. He loops his arm through Lecter’s and settles more comfortably against him.

‘Do they dine here often?’

‘At least once a week.’ Lecter plucks up Will’s hand and begins to play with it in a way that is wholly absent and oddly endearing for it. ‘Boarham Hall is but five miles to the south west, making them convenient neighbours for the rest of us. The other estates fan out, as it were, from that central point.’

‘Oh?’ Will’s heart has picked up in tempo but he endeavours to keep his voice even. ‘Who else do you count among your acquaintance hereabouts?’

‘Hm.’ Lecter rubs his thumb across the centre of Will’s palm, a gesture both soothing and provocative. ‘The du Mauriers you might have seen at the party - they spent the entire evening dangling their only offspring, Lady Bedelia, in hopes of netting a catch. Word is that Moray Abbey is in some danger from the creditors thanks to the Marquess’s excesses at the hazard table.’

‘Then they shall be desperate to find a match for their daughter.’ Will shudders. ‘Poor girl.’

‘I would not worry too much on that score. Lady Bedelia is quite capable of shifting for herself. Let me see, who else? The Browns of Avis Hall are particular friends of the Vergers. Their estates are adjoining. And nearby are the Boyles, whose family has occupied Boley Hall since before the Tudors held sway. On the other end of the scale we have the Hydes of Wyvern Abbey. I was up at Oxford with Francis Hyde, who was forever boasting that his grandfather had paid for the earldom with proceeds from his import business.’

‘New money? How terribly vulgar.’ Will grins.

‘And then finally there are the Granthams, new neighbours who have recently inherited Fangen Hall, although as it is some fifteen miles off, and Lord Wolfram is by all accounts to be found mostly at Bath, I anticipate seeing them out in society but rarely.’

To be found mostly at Bath.

A swell of contempt and choking anger catches Will unawares. He tugs his hand free and sits upright, drawing up his knees.

‘Will?’

He stiffens at the light touch at his back but manages a tight smile.

‘I think perhaps you are right. I have had too much sun today.’

‘Then we shall return to the house.’ Lecter studies him for a moment, thoughtful, before climbing to his feet. ‘Come.’

***

A pitcher of cloudy lemonade awaits them in the library. And biscuits, long and tube-shaped, sugar-sweet. Will kicks off his boots, ignoring Lecter’s amused look, and curls up on the garish astronomical sofa. Grabbing a biscuit, he sucks on it sullenly. Not knowing how to feel - or *why* he feels - is an odd state.

‘May I join you?’

Lecter, silky-smooth, insinuates himself into the space between Will and the sofa arm. Almost a reversal of the previous day’s dynamic. Now Will is the one resisting, curling away. Anticipating overtures that he is in no mood to entertain, he is nonplussed when Lecter merely presses a glass of lemonade into his hand and picks up a book from the side table.

‘Feel free to select something for yourself. I am sure that you, too, take pleasure in a good book.’

‘I - thank you, yes, I do.’

The Encyclopædia Britannica volume appears to have been tidied away. Taking a sip from his glass, Will sets it on the floor then leans across Lecter and plucks at random a clothbound tome from the pile on the side table. Bemused by this chaste turn of events, he is nonetheless grateful for the opportunity to regain his composure, and he feels his spirits lifting as he smooths a hand over the embossed cover.

‘You are an admirer of Mrs Radcliffe?’

There is a trace of laughter in Lecter’s voice. Will turns the book over and reads the lettering on the spine: *The Romance of the Forest*.

‘These are your books, are not they?’ he asks, a trifle defensively.

His complacency wavers a little more when Lecter informs him smugly, ‘As a matter of fact, that particular book belongs to Lady Margot. She is forever leaving novels about the place.’

Will’s mouth firms. ‘And what great work is it that *you* are reading, my lord?’ Leaning over, he tugs the leatherbound book from Lecter’s unresisting hands and flicks to the first page. ‘*Pride and Prejudice, Volume One. By the author of Sense and Sensibility*.’ WIth a smirk, he hands it back. ‘Sounds like a romance novel to me.’

To give Lecter his due, he looks only mildly exasperated by Will’s bad manners. ‘On the surface, perhaps. But it also offers a rather fine social commentary.’

This show of hauteur is uncommonly attractive, and Will finds that his desire for silence and introspection has been supplanted by the sudden and very great need to touch his companion again.

‘I shall take your word for the veracity of that,’ he says, sidling closer and sliding one arm around Lecter’s neck to play with the thick hair brushing his coat collar, ‘as I have yet to read it.’

‘Minx.’ It is the deep-throated growl that Will has come to covet. Lecter turns a heated gaze upon him, although he does not attempt to return his caresses. ‘Behave yourself.’

‘But I want you.’ Stroking the lobe of Lecter’s ear, he induces a rather satisfying groan.

‘And you shall have me.’ Lecter presses him back into the sofa, shifting to nuzzle his neck, lips feathering warm against Will’s skin. ‘Tonight, little wanton, you shall have all of me.’

‘Too long,’ sighs Will, arching his neck in encouragement of more of these exquisite attentions. ‘It is far too long to wait.’

Lecter is obliging for several more moments, mouthing damp kisses, fingers splaying across Will’s jaw to hold him in place. When a tongue tip presses behind his ear, Will moans and clutches at Lecter’s hand.

‘Gods.’ Lecter’s chuckle is breathless when he lifts his head. ‘You would tempt a saint, little ladybird.’

Impulse has Will reaching up to brush his thumb across a full lower lip that has fascinated him since their first meeting. How would it feel against his own?

‘And I venture you are no more saint than I.’

Their eyes meet, a moment of curious intensity shimmering between them. Until a brisk rapping at the library door jolts them apart.

‘Come in.’

Will jumps again a little at the brusqueness of Lecter’s tone, and clearly Chilton is taken aback as well, for the butler’s brows bristle splendidly as he enters and executes a short bow.

‘My apologies if I have disturbed you, my lord, but Mr Crawford and Mr Stammets have arrived for your meeting. Do you wish me to send them along to the belvedere?’

Rising from the sofa, Lecter smooths back his hair. ‘Ask them to wait, Chilton. I shall walk through with them.’

Chilton, with a withering look, leaves, and Lecter looks back at Will in apology. ‘My weekly appointment with my steward and head gardener. I had quite forgotten the time.’

‘Well, I have kept you fairly busy today.’

Will’s teasing smile is reciprocated and he feels it down to his toes.

‘I will be finished in time for dinner. Can you shift for yourself until then?’

‘Of course.’ And in a flash of mischief, taking up Lecter’s book, ‘I am of a mind to abandon Mrs Radcliffe in favour of your *Pride and Prejudice* - see what all the fuss is about.’

‘Then I have no doubt you will be splendidly entertained in my absence.’

With a final amused look, Lecter walks from the room, and Will thumbs through the pages of the book to find the opening chapter, settling himself into a comfortable position as he begins to read.

***

The twilight hours pass pleasantly enough until Will is reminded by eight strident chimes of the library clock to retire upstairs to bathe and change. He is more than half hoping that Lecter will join him, but in the event he completes his ablutions undisturbed, and at nine o’clock he walks into the Oak Room to find the count waiting for him by the sash windows. From the glittering dark of slicked back hair, it is evident that Lecter has found somewhere else to bathe, and Will raises his brows in mute query.

‘I availed myself of the plunge bath behind the orangery,’ comes the prompt explanation. ‘I keep a change of clothes there for days when I am mired in meetings - it is far more convenient than having to traipse back through to the other side of the house.’

‘Plunge bath?’ Will’s eyes widen. ‘What other marvels do you have hidden away?’

‘Well, for one thing, I am having a ballroom built beneath the belvedere tower.’ Lecter comes towards him, eyes lingering with smoky intent. ‘You look very well tonight, Will.’

Having picked out a coat of turquoise wool (cut high at the front and cinched at his trim waist with silver fastenings) and tight buckskin breeches that have seen him through several successful conquests, Will masks his gratification behind a mask of airy insouciance.

‘It is the country air, I daresay. London was downright odorous by the time I quitted it.’

‘The air hereabouts is said to be greatly restorative,’ says Lecter, with a smile that creates a pleasant fluttering in Will’s stomach. ‘But it cannot take credit for natural grace and perfection of form.’

‘Perfection?’ Wry, Will takes a seat at the table and shakes out his napkin. ‘Such flattery is gratifying but hardly necessary, my lord.’

I am bought and paid for, after all.

The words remain unsaid but their phantom presence dims Lecter’s smile and brings a tinge of regretful colour to Will’s cheeks. Before he can retract the sentiment, two solemn-faced servants enter carrying bowls of fragrant soup, and as Lecter joins him at the table, Will decides that the best course of action is simply to change the subject.

In the event, dinner passes pleasantly. More than that - there is a deep satisfaction in sitting and conversing with Lecter in this manner, in hearing the count speak of the things about which he is passionate, and in allowing himself to be drawn out in turn. When has anyone cared to hear Will’s views on politics or art? Or, indeed, on anything outside the purview of the bedchamber? Yet who can he blame for such an overlooking except himself? If he had cared enough to exercise the least bit of wisdom in his previous choice of partners… As it is, the acquisition of no fewer than three lovers in the last two months will surely have sealed his reputation as an unbridled libertine.

This thought is still more discomfiting when it occurs to him that his reputation is linked inextricably now with Lecter’s. Unless, of course, he were to leave Lecter House and Derbyshire before their liaison could become public knowledge. But then, wheedles an inner voice, are not all great men

forgiven their foibles? Is not it common course for a rich man to be in possession of a lover - and even to run a little wild?

The efficacy of this train of thought is such that by the commencement of the dessert course, Will has convinced himself that his presence in Lecter's life is no hindrance at all. His only desire now is to quiet his tiresome conscience, and he determines that the best course is to persuade his lover to forgo all after-dinner niceties and take him straight to bed.

Thus Will dips a langue de chat biscuit into his syllabub with singular intent and, eyes fixed on Lecter as he withdraws it, proceeds to suck away all traces of the creamy froth with filthy vigour.

It is much to his satisfaction that this results in Lecter swearing beneath his breath. 'I see what you are about, noxious creature. You would deny me my Madeira and cards.'

Still holding Lecter's fiery gaze, Will flicks out his tongue to catch a drip of foam. 'Have the Madeira brought up to your chamber,' he suggests pertly. 'As for the cards, they can wait. I cannot.'

More grumbling ensues, but so too do abrupt orders to have the library closed up and a bottle of Madeira delivered to the count's bedchamber, and Will is alight with want as they mount the stairs together. His cravat is off before they have even entered beneath the portal, and he moans his delight when, safely on the other side, he is thrust to the door and pinned against it by a hard body. Lips at his throat suck fiercely, and he scrabbles for purchase, clinging to Lecter's coat, eyes closed in rapture, hips jerking into the palm that rubs him hard through his breeches.

'Needful thing.' The timbre of Lecter's voice is sugar-rough. 'Feel what you do to me with your whining and squirming and confounded teasing.'

Will's bottom is cupped and lifted, and he wraps his legs around Lecter's waist, gasping at the contact of their erections straining beneath confining leather.

'I want to see it,' he breathes, fingers burrowing in Lecter's hair, tingling where teeth scrape gently at his jaw. 'I want to suck it.' He grins. 'Make you feel better.'

He is carried to the bed, where he pushes Lecter down and climbs atop him. Almost feral in want, he rises to his knees, tearing off his coat and waistcoat, and shucking out of his shirt. And then, under Lecter's heavy-lidded gaze, he bends to nuzzle at the rigid shape beneath his lover's front fall. The scent of light musk rouses a desperate need to taste, and he makes short work of the buttons, burying his face in Lecter's lap and taking the tip of his cock into his mouth with a satisfied sigh. He settles, then, to light sucking, straddling one of Lecter's thighs, rocking gently against it.

'Will.'

His name is groaned twice before he lifts his head, blinking, licking lips now swollen. He does not miss the way Lecter's gaze sharpens, lingering on the action.

'What?'

He knows that he sounds waspish, but Lecter only strokes his cheek and smiles.

'Take off your boots. And the rest. I would see all of you, little ladybird.'

Sighing, Will does as he is bid, paying no mind to where each article is flung.

‘There,’ turning from where he has dropped his stockings on the floor now littered with his things. ‘Does this please you?’

Lecter lunges for him and he is scooped up, giggling, and rolled onto his back. His lover looms above him, eyes ravenous, and Will reaches for him.

‘Let me pleasure you.’

He grasps Lecter’s hips and urges him forward until the count’s exposed cock bobs tantalisingly above his face. In all other respects, Lecter is fully dressed, the hard leather of his boots pressing into Will’s sides. Will curls both hands around that impressive cock and traces the slit with his tongue.

‘I should like to do this for you when you are occupied with your book.’ He sucks a kiss against the tip. ‘In the library, with the sun streaming in.’ Licking, then, lewd and loud. ‘Make you come with my fingers in your mouth to stop your sounds.’

‘As you are quite possibly the filthiest boy I have ever met,’ growls Lecter, ‘I do not doubt for a moment your capability to do just that.’ His hands grasp the headboard. ‘But for now, I shall make all the sounds that I like, thank you. So go to it.’

And, oh, Will does. He opens his mouth wide and takes the count’s cock deep, sucking with single-minded determination until he has brought his lover to the white-knuckled brink. Then ignoring Lecter’s protests, he pulls off, wriggling out from beneath him and reaching under the bed for the rosewood box.

‘Did you think to deny me my pleasure, too?’ he pants, as oil-slicked he fingers himself open. ‘I would have you come inside me, fill me with your seed.’

He pushes Lecter onto his back and straddles him once more. Breathing harshly, Lecter holds his cock at the base as Will sinks down onto it with little sighs.

‘I hope that this shall satisfy you, wanton boy.’

‘Yes,’ he moans, head thrown back, insensible now to all but their frantic coupling. ‘Oh *fuck*, yes.’

Astride his lover, thighs brushing the soft wool of the count’s coat, Will works himself up and down, revelling in the thick stretch. And soon Lecter is gripping his waist, surging up in deep rolling thrusts that paint his cheeks red with the urgency of his movements.

‘I - oh, I shall come,’ gasps Will, grinding down against the delicious friction that has him stiffening in preemptive pleasure.

‘What of it?’ Lecter rocks upwards again, arms around Will’s waist, securing him. He presses his lips to a nipple and tongues it roughly.

Will whimpers. ‘I will ruin your clothes.’

Lecter rolls them once more, hitching up Will’s leg and driving into him over and over. ‘Fuck my clothes,’ he growls.

As hot spend pulses deep within Will, he too spills, helpless and messy between them. Clinging in the juddering aftermath, he feels lips at his brow, and turns his face into Lecter’s neck. Words seem superfluous. Besides, he is at rather a loss, wondering once again why sex with this man feels so very different than with any other.

My boy

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

‘Is this what you wanted?’ hisses Hannibal, nipping at a tender earlobe. He withdraws almost completely and then slams back in. ‘Does this satisfy you?’

Will, laughing and flushed and beautifully naked, arches back into him. ‘Mm, yes.’ A hand reaches beneath to trace the join between them. ‘I love to be filled by you.’

‘*Gods*.’

Will it ever be enough? They have fucked every day, every night, for full a fortnight. *Hours* spent suckling pretty pink nipples until Will has come from that stimulation alone… Having Will pleasure him using only his mouth, swallowing his spend and cleaning him afterwards with his tongue… Fucking the boy in the library, both of them fully clothed, Will writhing in his lap… For all of Hannibal’s fine words on that first day, they have made of the estate a veritable playground of debauchery. And still, *still* Hannibal cannot seem to sate himself.

And it is not merely the boy’s body that he has taken pleasure in. Will’s mind, too, is a piquant delight. Humour sharp, curiosity voracious, he has proven to be a fine debate partner with a thirst for knowledge that Hannibal has been only too happy to slake. On this particular occasion, however, it had not been for answers that Will had sought him out, luring him upstairs with a sultry smile and lust-darkened eyes.

Hannibal runs seeking fingers along thin ribs, thumbing at erect little nipples.

‘You were appalling today. Parading yourself so shamefully in full view of the staff, interrupting me with salacious offers of fruit. Eating that *plum* in the most filthy manner!’

He withdraws again, all the way this time, teasing the head of his cock against the slicked, winking pink hole. This pulls a whine.

‘I wanted you.’

Will reaches back for him again, but this time Hannibal bats him away. ‘I was meeting with my staff. As you know full well that I do every afternoon. All you had to do was wait until tonight.’

He pushes inside again, just a little, holding Will fast. It is a terrible tease for both of them but Hannibal can weather it better.

‘Until after the party?’ It is a piteous whine. ‘Hours and hours.’

Thrusting shallowly, Hannibal tuts. ‘Spoiled boy.’

‘I needed you.’

That softens him. Still, ‘You had me this morning, did not you?’

A frantic fucking in the plunge bath, which Will has declared to be his new favourite place for lovemaking.

Squirming in the most maddening way, Will is stubborn in his own defence. ‘It was not long enough. You were too afraid of Chilton walking in.’

‘Brat.’ Hannibal presses his fingers into tender flesh, stilling the boy. ‘You will promise to behave better or I shall leave you wet and wanting.’ As once again, he withdraws completely.

‘No, please. I will, I promise,’ Will fairly wails. ‘ Do not make me wait.’

In truth, there is nothing Hannibal wants more than to feel Will’s hole clenching hot again around his cock. But he holds back for a few more agonising seconds.

‘You will *what*?’

‘I will behave, my lord. Only please, *please* give me your cock.’

Lust spikes sharply, and Hannibal contemplates prolonging this delicious game still further to see whether he can draw tears, to deliver a lesson in patience that will not be soon forgotten. But he is so very hard, and the boy beneath him is soft and willing, and he *needs* to come. With a groan of capitulation, he penetrates swiftly, fucking the boy deep, the bed frame shaking as he drives towards that explosion of sweet pleasure that sees them both crying out before collapsing onto the bed, hands twining together above their heads. In the glow of completion, Hannibal rubs his cheek against sweaty curls.

‘It is fortunate that a bath is even now being drawn. Wretched child. What have you done to me?’

He rolls onto his back and tugs Will into his side. As has become his habit, the boy curls against him, one thigh flung over Hannibal’s, hand flat on his glistening chest.

‘Nothing that you did not want.’

Still so defiant. A chuckle bubbles up. ‘I suppose that denial would be useless.’ He caresses one round buttock, shaping his palm to its plumpness. ‘*My lord*?’

Will nibbles on his lower lip and peeks upwards through tangled curls. ‘You have too many names.’

‘An odd complaint.’ Indulgent in his pleasure haze, Hannibal runs a finger down the curve of Will’s nose. ‘Particularly as you have yet to address me by any.’

‘May I, then?’ The brightening of blue eyes is oddly touching. ‘May I choose how to address you? For when we are alone?’

Hannibal sighs, feigning reluctance. ‘I suppose so.’

There is a pause, then, ‘Does this mean that you wish me to stay?’

A moment of blankness follows. Until Hannibal catches the meaning behind those slightly tremulous words, and meets Will’s guarded gaze with incredulity.

‘Of course you are to stay. Why would you ask such a thing?’

‘It has been two weeks.’

It is a soft reminder of the trial period that, in truth, Hannibal had forgotten entirely about.

‘Little ladybird,’ he murmurs, a strange affection welling. ‘Do not you know? You are my boy.’

‘I am?’ Breathless, eyes dancing, Will pulls back a little. ‘You mean it?’

‘Will.’ Hannibal’s tone is mildly chastising. ‘I have it in writing, do not I? You are mine for full a year.’

An odd smile twists that seductive little mouth and Will’s eyes slide away. ‘Well, eleven months and a half, anyway.’

It is not quite the response that Hannibal was expecting but then, as he has noted before, Will is anything but predictable.

‘Pedant,’ he tuts. ‘Very well, then. Eleven months and a half. And not a day fewer!’

Will is now wriggling away, and with a huff Hannibal releases him. It is, he supposes, past time that they bathed if they are not to be late for the much-anticipated dinner at Boarham Hall. He slips from the bed and follows, therefore, eyes appreciative on the boy’s pert backside, and takes the usual pleasure in watching his lover step nimbly into the copper tub.

As always, Will waits until Hannibal is seated behind him to settle back, firm bottom caged by Hannibal’s thighs. It is a singular pleasure that Hannibal looks forward to every day, and on the one occasion when Will had shown an interest in the shower stall - a contraption able to facilitate only one person at a time - Hannibal had managed to put him off quite admirably with the revelation that there was as yet no method available for heating the water in the upper tank.

Taking up a muslin cloth, Hannibal spreads it gently across Will’s chest.

‘Are you nervous about tonight?’

‘Nervous?’ Will scoffs. ‘Certainly not. After dining with them half a dozen times, I have grown quite used to Lord Verger and Lady Margot.’

Hannibal hooks his chin over the boy’s shoulder. ‘Hm, but tonight there will be several new people in our party.’

Will turns to fix him with a disdainful look. ‘I am perfectly capable of making my own way in society, my lord.’

‘I am aware of that.’ Rather too aware, but Hannibal has no intention of venturing into dangerous territory by pursuing the matter. He rubs his cheek against Will’s. ‘And do stop *my lording* me. You wanted to pick a name, so go to it.’

This elicits a genuine grin. ‘Very well. Let me see.’ Hannibal’s hand is captured and pressed between Will’s as the boy muses, ‘Count Hannibal Lecter the Eighth. What do your friends call you?’

‘My lord,’ replies Hannibal dryly. ‘Or Lecter.’

Will darts him a sly look. ‘And lovers? Have none of them called you *Hannibal*?’ He sighs the name, and despite the fact that he is being exceedingly mocking, it is a sound that is far from unpleasant to Hannibal’s ears.

‘Not a one,’ he replies shortly. In fact, none but his parents have ever addressed him as such.

‘What a waste.’ Will wrinkles his nose.

‘By all means, feel free to make use of it if it amuses you,’ Hannibal finds himself saying gruffly.

***

The drive to Boarham Hall is unremarkable - a succession of leafy lanes flanked by farming land - until a sudden turn through a set of high gates reveals what appears to be a castle towering over the landscape. Parapets of grey stone and a wide front door of solid oak promote the illusion of a fearsome domain that has sprung, fully-realised, from the pages of some gothic horror. Hannibal has witnessed many a wide-eyed reaction to this spectacle, and it is with anticipation that he suggests that Will should let down the side glass of his window and look out as they cross a narrow bridge that arches over the Wye.

As, smiling, Will does so, Hannibal takes the opportunity to allow his gaze to linger uninhibited on his young lover. Slim calves encased in white stockings, black velvet breeches and coat framing perfectly the slenderness of his body, determined chin jutting over a cravat and waistcoat of white silk, Will Graham would grace the arm of anyone he chose to walk out with. Straightening the cuffs of his own coat, a deliberate contrast in scarlet, Hannibal spends a happy few minutes debating exactly where and in what manner he will begin stripping the finery from his boy once they have done their duty by Mason and Margot. Only as the carriage draws to a halt beneath the shadow of the entrance tower does he pull his thoughts away from such carnal machinations. As pleasant as they are, dwelling on them will only serve to make the next few hours onerous, and he owes his friends better than that.

'What do you think?' He leaves his own seat to perch beside Will who is still staring, riveted, out of the window. 'It is a fair prospect, would not you say?'

'A startling one, certainly!'

Will turns, and for an instant they are nose to nose. Hannibal's pulse quickens as dark-fringed eyes flick down to his lips, but a moment later they are both distracted by a clamour at the carriage door and much scrabbling of nails upon wood.

'Ah.' Hannibal indicates the window opposite, where two enormous black paws and a shiny nose are pressed against the fogged glass. 'It appears that we have been sent an escort. Good evening, Pavlov.'

He explains, as they make the short walk up to the main door, that Boarhounds have been kept by the Lords Boarham for centuries, and that Pavlov is one of three currently residing at Boarham Hall. Will, to his amusement, seems hardly to be listening, his attention very much fixed on the enormous dog that snuffles round him keenly, his hand coming up to stroke tentatively at its great head.

As they approach the oak door, it is swung open by a liveried servant to reveal a courtyard lit with lanterns and a laughing Margot, a vision in turquoise silk, hair bound up in a scarf through which ringlets have been artfully threaded.

'Well done, Pavlov. I see you have managed to deliver your charges without incident.'

Hannibal bows, as does Will, whose hand is now settled quite proprietarily on the dog's neck.

'Not quite without incident. Mr Graham, as you see, is fairly smitten.'

'Better that than a repeat of what happened earlier.' Margot's voice lowers conspiratorially. 'Mr Butterworth is in disgrace after wiping himself all over Lady Bedelia. My lady's maid had to take her away and set her up in one of my gowns! Can you imagine?'

'At this moment, I am imagining all sorts,' laughs Will. 'Please tell me that Mr Butterworth is another of your dogs.'

'Why, Mr Graham, how scandalous of you to consider otherwise.'

Margot grins at him, and Hannibal shakes his head at the pair of them. Since discovering that they share the same wicked sense of humour, Will and Margot have developed quite the bond. It is one that Hannibal is happy to encourage, but there are times when he feels a touch of envy at the blitheness with which both seem to navigate the world. As the only son of a duke, it is a luxury which he has never been afforded.

‘Meg, what have you done with our guests? Ah, Lecter, Mr Graham, well met!’ Mason hurries forth from the main door of the house proper, situated at the top of a flight of steps at the other end of the courtyard. Through it filter sounds of laughter and the clinking of glasses. ‘Now that you are here, perhaps you can help me separate Lord Huntingdon and Mr Brown. They have been snarling at each other over the punch bowl for a good half hour.’

‘Well, if you will invite both of your lovers to dine at the same table, what do you expect but a profusion of bruised feelings?’ asks Hannibal dryly.

At this, Will’s head whips around while Margot sniggers.

‘Nicholas - Lord Huntingdon - is not my lover,’ hisses Mason. ‘Just because we had the merest dalliance at the Morays’ last week…’ He grimaces. ‘I would that the pair of you had been in attendance, that you might have saved me from my own stupidity.’

‘As I told you the other night at dinner,’ Hannibal reminds his friend mildly, ‘Nicholas Boyle has coveted you for years. Finding you alone, of course he was going to chance his arm.’

The four of them, accompanied by the loping dog, proceed into the house. The door having been propped open, scents of honeysuckle and rose drift in, mingling with the beeswax of dozens of candles that suffuse the main hall with a gentle glow. Mason and Margot make the necessary introductions, for although Hannibal is familiar with most present, Will has yet to meet them formally: Nicholas Boyle - the Marquess of Huntingdon, heir to the Duke of Boley - and his younger sister Lady Cassandra, both of them auburn-haired and serious-eyed; Matthew Brown, vivacious younger son of a viscount, with whom Mason has been falling in and out of love for years; Francis Hyde, the tall and dark-haired only son of the Earl of Wyvern; Lady Bedelia du Maurier, sole heiress of the redoubtable Marchioness of Moray; and Miss Abigail Hobbs, quietly-spoken youngest daughter of a respectable local family, whom Margot has apparently decided to make her latest pet project. They are a handsome group, and none above six-and-twenty in age, for the Earl and Countess of Boarham have been in Bath for a month or so, along with several of their friends.

It is a fresh-faced and exuberant crowd, therefore, that sits down together at the banqueting hall table. The talk shifts from topic to topic with nary a pause: from the latest excesses of the debt-ridden Beau Brummell to the merits of the newly-installed gas lighting in Westminster. A discussion of Napoleon Bonaparte’s exile to Elba is mid-flow when Hannibal realises that two voices are notably absent from the chorus of opinion: those of Lord Hyde and Will. They are engaged in low-pitched conversation of their own. But before he can attempt to discern what is being said between them, he is drawn into a debate by Mason on the efficacy of the Treaty of Paris; and by the time that discussion has come to a natural end, Will is speaking with Lady Cassandra, while Lord Hyde has fallen back to his usual sullenness.

The arrival of the entrée, Lorraine soup, draws the party back together in unanimous praise.

‘I have Count Lecter to thank for it,’ confides Margot, raising her wine glass to Hannibal in informal toast, ‘for lending me Monsieur LeBeau. He has quite transformed our kitchen!’

‘Poor Cordell.’ Dourly, Mr Brown regards his own steaming bowl. ‘It is not a pleasant thing to be so easily replaced.’

This provokes Mason to a deep blush, and Hannibal is ruminating on a suitable change of subject when, to his surprise, Will speaks up.

‘No, indeed, although it could be said that change is a natural part of life.’ Sky blue eyes are steady on Mr Brown as he adds softly, ‘I have often thought that easy partings are a sign that Fate is making a course correction.’

‘Well said, sir.’ Lord Hyde bestows on Will a smile that in Hannibal’s sour opinion is nauseatingly ingratiating.

‘Why, Mr Graham, you sound like a mariner,’ giggles Miss Hobbs, all flouncy curls and batting lashes.

Meanwhile, Mason is looking more desperate by the second, and mounting irritation harshens Hannibal’s voice as he interjects. ‘The material point is that I have no more intention of parting with LeBeau than Lord Boarham has of getting rid of Cordell. We are used to them and they to us. My young friend here has yet to learn that convenience is as important a factor as any other where fidelity in partnerships is concerned.’

He feels the icy blast of Will’s stare from across the table.

Everyone proceeds to consume their soup with alacrity, and for a while the silence is broken only by the occasional crackle of split wood in the fireplace. Eventually, it is Lord Huntingdon who steers them onto a safer topic.

‘Lady Margot was telling me earlier that Boarham Hall has a new litter of puppies. Six, is not it, Lady Margot?’

‘That is right. Clementine gave birth last night. There were seven but, alas, the smallest did not survive past morning.’

‘Oh, I would love to see them,’ exclaims Miss Hobbs, and there follows a flurry of agreement.

***

A hearty second course later, the general talk has turned to the evening’s entertainments: cards followed by dancing in the Long Gallery.

‘Anyone wishing to escape either or both of these pursuits should feel free to explore the gardens,’ says Margot with a mischievous smile. ‘And should you like to stop in on Clementine, she has set herself up in a corner of the pantry.’

The ladies depart first, and while Mason serves port to the gentlemen, Hannibal endeavours to catch Will’s eye. When he does, he wishes immediately that he had not.

Yet the idea of this silent battle rumbling on all night is intolerable, and so he ventures abruptly, ‘I have a notion to show Mr Graham the aviary.’ And before Will, who already looks set to protest, can speak, ‘Would you excuse us, Verger?’

‘Of course.’ Mason, still serving, waves absently in the direction of the front door. ‘You know the way.’

‘Indeed. We shall join you again presently.’

Hannibal rises and Will, the little devil, keeps him waiting for several seconds before he, too, stands. Issuing a tight smile to the general assembly, Hannibal leads the way back outside. In the courtyard he

stops, breathing deeply the scented air. Will's steps are slower, and Hannibal can feel his seething outrage.

'*My young friend*?'

He holds up a silencing hand. 'Not here.'

To their left are steps which end at a rough-hewn door set into the perimeter wall. With a gesture to follow, Hannibal proceeds down the steps, pushing open the door to reveal a lawned terrace. Stretching almost its entire length is a long white structure: fine mesh stretched over a wrought iron framework, with a domed roof, and perches of various lengths slotted within.

'The aviary,' he says tersely.

Will casts him a derisive glance as he passes beneath the stone archway. 'I had guessed.'

It is now just past nine o'clock, and the light that remains tinges everything in rich gold. Will steps up to the aviary and peers in at the sleepy inhabitants: half a dozen love birds huddle in pairs, and several smaller songbirds are also in residence, tiny shadows flitting about in the moonlight. Hannibal, taking a seat on an adjacent ornamental bench, watches their antics for a time, but his gaze returns repeatedly to the boy until, with a displeased huff, Will relents and turns to face him.

'I hope you have brought me out here to apologise, or else -'

'I do not take kindly to ultimatums, Will.' Then, more softly, 'I have brought you out here to talk. Come and sit with me.'

After a short hesitation Will joins him, although the space he leaves between them is pointedly wide.

'You are angry with me.'

The resignation in Hannibal's voice prompts raised brows and a firming of full lips. 'Are you surprised?'

'I was perhaps a trifle high-handed,' Hannibal allows at length.

'You were a patronising ass,' shoots back Will, 'intent on putting your *young friend* in his place.'

'Slighting you was not my object,' Hannibal insists, although the memory of his disdainful words is discomfiting. 'I wished only to save Verger from a difficult situation.'

'By placating Mr Brown?'

'In order to prevent a scene? Certainly.'

Will's brows draw together. 'I did not care for the way he spoke. He seemed to me a surly fellow, and surely your friend deserves better.'

'You were not so discerning when Lord Hyde sought to engage you,' says Hannibal with haughty emphasis.

'Lord Hyde?' A moment of incomprehension is followed by an incredulous laugh. 'Is *that* what this is about? You were jealous of my attentiveness to another man?'

‘Not jealous,’ Hannibal counters immediately, the charge bringing disconcerting heat to his cheeks. ‘Concerned. Lord Hyde is one of the most insidious individuals whom I have ever encountered, and I would caution you to be on your guard against him. Of what were the two of you speaking, anyway?’

‘I really do not recall.’ Blue eyes fix on him with censorious coolness. ‘Certainly nothing that put me in need of *rescuing*.’ Will’s nose wrinkles in repugnance. ‘I may be young but please do not mistake me for some helpless milksop.’

At this, Hannibal’s lips twitch. ‘Milksop? Firebrand, more like.’ And, at Will’s reluctant smile, ‘What say you to a truce, Mr Graham? Will you shake on it?’

Extending his hand, he waits, and when after a few moments Will’s smaller palm slides soft against his own, the last knots of tension unravel. Threading their fingers together, Hannibal tugs Will against him, needing to feel him warm and receptive again after their quarrel. Will slips an arm around his waist, and with a pleased hum Hannibal lays his cheek against Will’s hair. He breathes in the tangy scent of lime blossom mingled with the sweetness of lily-of-the-valley, and smiles at the memory of the gift that he had the previous night left for Will in his bedchamber - a bespoke perfume from Floris of St James. No more orange and ambergris. It had been too unpalatable a reminder of unworthy rivals in the time *before*. This fragrance is far more suited to Will: pure, bright, and clean. Hannibal tightens his hold, and they sit for a time wrapped in silence and each other, the heavy richness of twilight a lulling balm for hurt feelings.

‘I suppose that we must go back.’ It is a little voice, wheedling.

Hannibal smiles. ‘For a while, yes. One must sing for one’s supper, you know.’

‘Not for too long, please. I would have you hard between my thighs tonight... Hannibal.’

Will looks up at him then, guileless, eyes darkened to indigo by slumbrous need. And Hannibal *wants* with a hunger that trembles through him.

‘Wicked, to say such things to me when you know that here I cannot touch you as I would like.’

An ostentatious cough startles them both to separating, and a dark form detaches itself from the shadow thrown by the open door.

‘Am I interrupting?’ Lord Hyde struts into view, his face a picture of innocence, voice dripping insouciance. ‘I do hope not.’

Slowly Hannibal uncoils from his seat, resentment at the intrusion stiffening his frame. ‘Is there a problem, Lord Hyde?’

‘Not at all, but Lady Margot requires another set for whist, and everyone else is dancing.’

‘Well then, Mr Graham.’ Pointedly turning his back on Lord Hyde, Hannibal smiles down at his lover. ‘Shall we oblige Lady Margot?’

‘By all means.’

Will rises with his usual unconscious grace, and Hannibal tries not to bristle at the covetous look in Lord Hyde’s cold blue eyes as he watches.

‘And what of you, Lord Hyde?’ asks Will, as all three venture back towards the courtyard. ‘Shall you be dancing or playing?’

With a sneer, Lord Hyde tosses his head. ‘I do not care for cards. Dice, now, that is a different matter. Give me a game of Hazard any day over cards.’

‘I have heard your father express much the same opinion,’ says Hannibal. It is hard to keep from his voice a note of censure, for rumours have been rife for years about debts and drunken routs at Wyvern Abbey. ‘How is the earl?’

If possible, Lord Hyde’s countenance darkens further. ‘My father does not vary. He is as indifferent as he has ever been, in both health and temper. But still,’ with a twist of thin lips, ‘as long as he keeps his wine cellar stocked, what care I?’

As they re-enter the house, Hannibal finds that he is perturbed less by Lord Hyde’s callous remarks about his father than by the fact that throughout the entire exchange his eyes were fastened greedily on Will.

***

‘I like your friends,’ declares Will some three hours later, as they sit close together in the carriage that bounces and rattles over rutted track. ‘All apart from Lord Hyde and Mr Brown, that is.’ He twines his fingers with Hannibal’s as he confides, ‘I do believe, having seen them together, that Lord Verger and Lord Huntingdon are much better suited.’

‘Interfering child.’

But there is a smile in Hannibal’s voice and a welling contentment in his heart. They have just passed through the main gates of the Lecter estate, and soon he will kneel at Will’s feet, and kiss his way up that beautiful lean body, and lavish on the boy all the pleasures that he has spent the past several hours envisioning. *His* boy. What more could he possibly want?

Pulling Will into his lap, he kisses the tip of his nose and whispers against his cheek, ‘Look, there is the house. Are you glad to be back again?’

‘I am always glad to be home,’ murmurs Will, and settles against him with a sigh.

Home. Curious how suddenly that word seems the sweetest that Hannibal has ever heard.

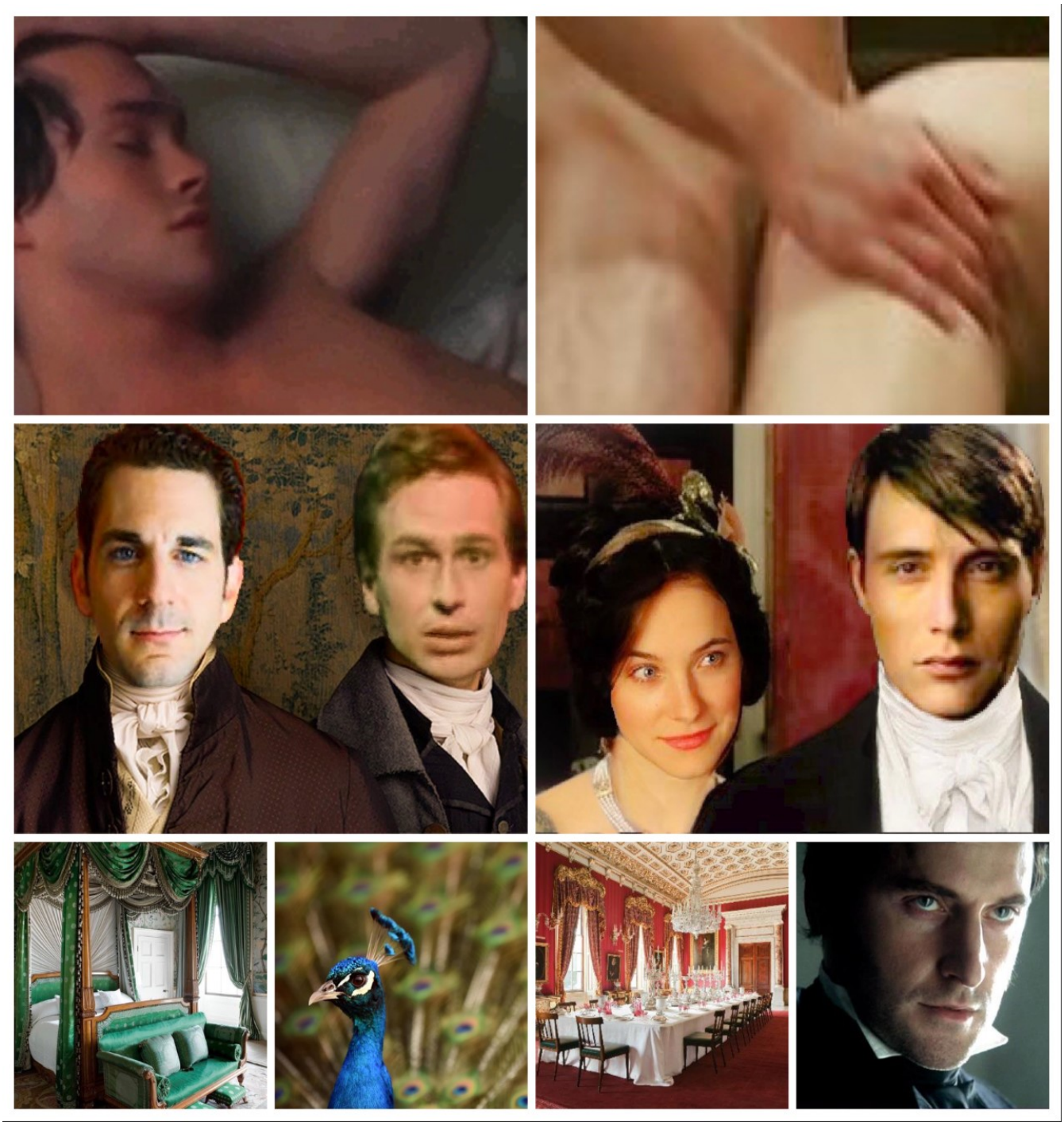
Chapter End Notes

The Boarhound was the ancestor of the Great Dane, a German-bred cross between an English Mastiff and an Irish Wolfhound. They were bred for hunting boar and were incredibly powerful. The change in name came towards the end of the nineteenth century, when a naturalist historian, the Comte de Buffon, came across a Greyhound-type Boarhound in Denmark, and commented that the climate had transformed the breed into “le Grand Danois”. Hence the Great Danish dog was born, later to become known simply as the Great Dane.

Pavlov, Mr Butterworth and Clementine would have looked like this:

The Greyhound.

Intrigues and excitement



Something is different. Will's brow wrinkles as he surfaces slowly from sleep, cataloguing sensations one by one. First, he is sprawled across the mattress, a feat not generally possible in his narrow bed. Second, said mattress seems to be missing the lumps that he has learned to circumvent by avoiding certain spots. Third, his cheek is pressed to a warm, broad, familiar back.

He lifts his head, eyes flicking over the still-sleeping form beside him, and grins as the full significance of the situation sinks in. Last night, after their return from Boarham Hall and a succession of thorough ravishments that had in all probability carried his cries of ecstasy clear to the

other side of the house, he had fallen asleep in the count's bed, fully expecting that he would at some point be carried back to his own room and left to sleep out the remainder of the night alone as usual. Yet here he is still.

Of course, it could have been an oversight. Perhaps Hannibal had simply fallen asleep without meaning to. But no - looking around, it is clear that at some point he had left the bed and tidied up the clothes that they had cast off in careless haste the moment the bedroom door bolt had been slammed home. Will's continued presence in his bed was a deliberate choice, then. The realisation makes Will quite giddy, and with a stifled giggle he rolls onto his side.

The sheets are tangled around their legs, and before him his lover's shape is painted pale gold in the morning light that streams through a half-open shutter. His lover. *Hannibal*. Strange how intimate even the thought of his given name is. A name that Will has been granted exclusive use of. He cradles the knowledge jealously, shaping the syllables to his lips and then smiling at his own foolishness.

Hannibal faces away from him, his breathing deep and steady. Will allows his gaze to wander, lingering on defined muscles and strong curves. It is a beautiful sight but soon merely looking is not enough. He slips his arms around Hannibal's middle and presses himself along the line of his back. Lips at his nape, he strokes softly across stomach muscles toned by hours of riding. Up then, exploring hair-roughened pectorals. His thumb contacts a nipple, which tightens beneath the light touch. At the hitch in Hannibal's breathing, Will freezes, but in the next moment his lover relaxes again. An idea takes form, and a smirk shapes Will's lips. Just *how* deeply Hannibal sleeps he has yet to test, and as now seems the ideal opportunity…

The first touch to Hannibal's cock draws an inadvertent gasp from *Will*, for it is half-hard and filling rapidly. In wonder, he curls his hand around it and feels the weight snug against his palm. His own cock stirs in sympathy, pressed to the cleft between Hannibal's buttocks, and instinctively he begins to rock, biting his lip at the delicious friction. He continues palming Hannibal's cock, gentle, aware that really he needs oil for this. But the oil is - where? He does not recall seeing Hannibal put it away. He raises his head and - there it is, on the side table, just out of reach. No matter. Slick is coating his fingers already, and he uses it to massage beneath the head, the same spot that he loves to have touched on himself. Once, he recalls fondly, they had brought each other to climax simply by each stroking the other just there.

Hannibal's breathing is less even now, though still he sleeps on. Will ruts harder against him, chasing his own pleasure even as he continues to work the cock in his fist. Hannibal shifts suddenly, and Will finds his cock slipping sticky between his lover's thighs. He closes his eyes and whimpers softly, imagining…

'Do not stop.' Hannibal nuzzles back against him. 'Make me ready to take you.'

'Oh.' The sleep-rough request steals Will's breath. 'I thought you asleep.'

'I was.' A soft laugh ends in a groan. 'Your hand put paid to that. So go on.'

Will continues stroking Hannibal's cock, which rises eagerly, pushing into his touch. 'You mean it? You wish me to -'

Hannibal raises himself enough to grab the glass vial. He tosses it onto the bed. 'Fuck me. Yes, little ladybird, I do. Very much.'

Will wonders, as he anoints his fingertips with the fragrant oil, whether he should tell Hannibal that he has done this only a handful of times. Slipped in an exploratory finger while sucking someone off,

certainly. But penetrate another human being in the biblical sense? To give a plaything such power is a rarity.

The thought slips away as he dips his middle finger between Hannibal's cheeks and circles the little pucker of flesh. Hannibal writhes back immediately into his touch, and without even meaning to Will slides in up to the first knuckle. The tight heat is intimidating, and hastily he adds more oil before experimentally withdrawing and then pressing back inside.

'*Gods*. Will, another.'

'Are you s-' He trails off into a moan as his cock is grasped and fisted, beads of precome welling over.

'Another.'

So he adds another finger, pumping in and out, circling gently. Then he remembers something, and on the next pass he crooks his fingers to feel for the sweet spot inside that Hannibal is so damnedly good at teasing in *him*. Ah, just there. Slowly he brushes his fingertips against it, back and forth, until Hannibal is arching against him, breathing ragged. Will withdraws his fingers and grazes a kiss against his lover's nape.

'Are you ready?'

In lieu of an answer, Hannibal guides the head of Will's cock to the entrance that glistens with oil. And Will has barely breached him when, with an impatient sound, Hannibal presses back, engulfing Will in delicious, squeezing heat. He slides his hand along Hannibal's thigh.

'Lift up for me.'

Is that his voice, so rasping in command? It must be, for Hannibal brings his knee up to his chest, and Will moans as he eases deeper. A hand reaches back, fingers tangling in his hair, tightening.

'Move.'

And so he does, eyes wide. It is all-consuming, the tight velvet grip that milks him as he pulls out and rocks back in, sliding to the hilt. He hooks his chin over Hannibal's shoulder, panting, cheek to cheek. He reaches to wrap his hand again around Hannibal's straining cock, and as he strokes, frantic in sympathy to such hardness, Hannibal groans into the pillow and pulls himself free of their joining.

Will whines in protest, but it quickly becomes clear that his lover has no intention of stopping. Rather, he rises onto all fours, looking round and pinning Will with a feral smile.

'Now *fuck me*.'

And how glorious it is, to kneel up and take himself in hand, and press back into the sucking warmth of Hannibal's body. Will's fingers press white into Hannibal's hips, and urgency sets him to shallow thrusting, head thrown back, staccato sounds punched out of him with every side inward.

'Deeper.'

Hannibal's voice is as dark treacle. Helplessly responsive to its commands, Will slams in hard, burying himself in a powerful thrust that locks them together, the telltale pleasure coil starting up a rhythmic rippling that he can only drive towards with a harsh sob.

‘Hannibal, oh gods, you are so tight. I cannot last. Come - come with me.’

The sound of his lover’s fist slapping slick over his own cock tips Will over the edge, and he comes in a series of erratic thrusts, sensation flooding, muscles tightening and releasing, shuddering through his climax. Hannibal follows; Will feels him seizing and convulsing beneath him. They collapse to the bed together, Will slipping free and tugging at Hannibal so that he turns, allowing Will to crawl into his arms. His hair is smoothed back, praises crooned against his temple, and he clings with a strange sort of desperation, an emotion that he cannot name clogging his throat. Such intensity he has experienced but rarely, and only, *only* with this man.

For a while they lie entwined, until gradually their breathing slows to normal. Will noses against Hannibal’s neck, perspiration-damp.

‘See? If you had allowed me to stay the night before this, you could have enjoyed such an awakening several times over.’

‘Imp.’ But Hannibal’s tone is indulgent. ‘I must admit, I see little reason to part with you again now that you have made yourself indispensable at *all* hours.’

Will’s heart skips at the words, though he endeavours to sound airily casual as he replies, ‘Oh, very well. It will be something of a hardship to be so very much at your beck and call, but I am not one to shirk my duty.’

***

The fortnight that follows sees preparations unfold for the dinner party that Hannibal has planned for Midsummer’s Eve. Will accompanies him on a round of invitation-giving that takes several days, as inevitably they are invited to stay for refreshment of various sorts by each grateful recipient. Promising to keep the party to a modest eighteen, that they might as promised utilise the private dining room, Hannibal has nevertheless devised an evening of lavish entertainments that will end with a display of fireworks which their guests shall view from the belvedere tower.

All from the Vergers’ dinner have been invited, including the obnoxious Lord Hyde. Upon Will’s objection, Hannibal points out wryly that *noblesse oblige* prevents him from excluding the viscount merely on the grounds that Will considers him *a surly fellow*. It is some little consolation when, upon calling at Wyvern Abbey, they are informed abruptly that both the earl and viscount are indisposed and cannot receive visitors. Will climbs back aboard Hannibal’s carriage with the fervent wish that this indisposition will prove lengthy enough to prevent Lord Hyde’s attendance at the party, while in the next moment chastising himself for such an ignoble thought.

In addition to the aforementioned guests are invited the Lord Lieutenant, Lord Bloom, and his wife the countess; the Earl and Countess of Boarham, who are expected back in Derbyshire several days before the party; the Boarhams’ very good friends Lord and Lady Avis, Matthew Brown’s parents; and finally the Lords Price, whom Hannibal explains are particular friends who reside in the fashionable Berkeley Square in London, and who have ventured north for a summer tour of the peaks.

‘They shall be staying for a week in Bakewell, a market town only a few miles off, and I shall be very glad for you to know them.’

The affection with which Hannibal speaks of these friends renders Will uncommonly nervous, lest when at last they meet he should be found wanting in some way. But there are other concerns which occupy him sufficiently that he does not dwell too long on such matters. For one thing, Hannibal’s insistence that he should have new clothes for the party involves the ferrying of the count’s tailor from

London, and half a day spent being examined and measured and generally treated like a doll. Then there is the renovation of his bedchamber (which Will has all but abandoned except for use as a private dressing room). The sorry excuse for a bed is removed and replaced by a singularly grand four-poster with hangings of thick silk in green and silver. It is to serve, in Hannibal's chivalrous words, as a convenient recourse should Will prefer at any time to sleep alone (privately, Will is sure that such a time will never come, but he presses a kiss to his lover's cheek and murmurs dutiful thanks). Out goes the rustic furniture, and in are brought a sofa of rich green velvet and several exquisite Hepplewhite pieces - dressing table, looking glass and armoire - all arranged to complement the new wallpaper of hand-painted silk which depicts trees and foliage and all manner of exotic birds.

It is in this much-improved room that Will stands patiently on the day of the party, as Randall bustles around him making last-minute adjustments to his new high-cut coat.

Will's eyes are upon the wallpaper and a beady-eyed painted raven, ruffled charcoal feathers reflected in the self-standing looking glass, when a piercing shriek from the hallway causes him to jerk around in surprise. Randall, kneeling at his side, tuts around a mouthful of pins.

'Mr Graham, sir, if I do not correct the line of this hem, His Lordship will have me mucking out the stables for a week.'

'Apologies, Randall,' mutters Will, still distracted, though he turns back obediently to face the mirror again. 'But tell me, am I correct in thinking that there is a peacock loose in the house?'

'*A* peacock? More like six peacocks, sir.' Randall grimaces, even as his fingers resume their deft work. 'My only hope is that they do not get into the pantry.'

'*Six*?' As if in rude reply, from outside the door comes a particularly raucous call, and a moment later it is answered from somewhere even deeper in the house. Will glowers. 'So much for promises!'

'Oh dear. It seems that I am in trouble.' In strolls Hannibal from his bedchamber, through the open connecting doorway. 'What precisely did I promise?'

Even as Will fumes, his eyes rove greedily over the fine figure that his lover cuts in his cinched coat, silk waistcoat, and rather shockingly tight silk breeches: it is the same ensemble of blue threaded with gold that he wore to the Theatre Royal in May, and its impact is just as devastating as when Will was unable to refrain from staring at him from across a packed auditorium. Even so…

'No birds. That is what you promised, as well you know.'

'Beautiful boy.' A warm palm is set to the small of his back, and amber eyes connect with his through the looking glass. 'Did not I tell you that a silver tailcoat would be just the thing to frame this glorious head of hair?'

'Do not think that by changing the subject you will get out of the discussion.' How annoying is the flush of awareness that has bloomed in Will's cheeks.

Hannibal has, of course, noted it. His voice is smug as he asserts, 'I have broken no promises. As I recall, it was the prospect of *flying and swooping* that you objected to. Peacocks are hard-pressed to do either. Besides,' and he slips an arm around Will's waist, stroking the embroidery of his silver and blue waistcoat, 'they will vastly complement your colour palette.'

'My lord, perhaps you should allow Randall to finish his task. If, that is, you wish me to be ready in time to greet your guests.'

It is a warning reminder that they have a rapt audience, and issued none too soon, given the unmistakable stirring interest that is currently pressing into his -

‘Oh, very well.’ With a sigh, Hannibal releases him and steps back. ‘Randall, how goes it? Have you managed to sort out that damnable hem?’

‘I think so, my lord.’ Wafting a tiny pair of silver scissors, Randall sits back on his heels. ‘Yes, I would say that is much better. What says my lord?’

Will endures with barely-suppressed impatience the critical inspection that follows. At last, however, Hannibal pronounces himself to be satisfied, and Randall makes his exit with a quiet chuckle that does not escape Will.

‘Really, my lord, you make a nonsense of me,’ he says crossly, allowing nevertheless the invasion of his space as Hannibal gathers him into his arms.

‘Poor darling.’ Full lips graze his jaw, fingers stroking the sliver of skin that is exposed above his high cravat. ‘Yet how can I be expected to resist such a beauty?’

Tilting his head back, Will warns, ‘If you disarrange my hair, then your guests will simply have to endure the results. I refuse to submit to another hour of teasing and puffing up.’

‘Of course I will not spoil your hair. It is fashioned into the most delightful quiff, my darling, and must be admired by everyone.’

Darling. It is admittedly pleasing to be addressed thus, yet a trickle of unease accompanies the strange thrill. For only at his peril shall Will forget that his time here is limited. Twelve months. No, eleven. With a start, he realises that he has been at Lecter House now for full a month. How exceedingly quickly the time is passing…

‘Come, my lord.’ Slipping out of Hannibal’s embrace, he sighs and stiffens his shoulders, readying for the fray. ‘We should go down before the peacocks decide to play hosts in our stead.’

***

An hour into dinner, Will has decided that his favourite of tonight’s guests - almost rivalling his affection for Lady Margot Verger - are the Lords Price. Whether this is partly as a consequence of their having been seated at either side of him at the far end of the enormous dining table, and thus being his main sources of conversation, he cannot tell. What he does know is that here is a couple determined to be delighted with everything - the county, the house, the dishes that are spread before them, even the strutting peacock that has just performed two full turns about the room while protesting stridently, its fanned plumage brushing the backs of the guests’ chairs with every pass.

Such easy good humour as the Lords Price exhibit is infectious; and not for the first time, Will pities Lady Avis, Mr Brown’s timid mother, who is sandwiched between a lovesick Lord Huntingdon (who does little save stare stubbornly across the table at Mason Verger) and the blackly silent *former* Lord Hyde, now Lord Wyvern. This latter, Will supposes, should for once be forgiven his reticence, for he has only lately assumed the earldom, his father having passed away a mere seven days since.

‘Is not it surprising to see the new earl so soon out in society?’ asks Will of his newest acquaintances, in lowered tones.

Lord James, a pleasant-looking gentleman with an open countenance and kind brown eyes, weighs in first. ‘A little, but then the family has ever been odd. And I do not believe that father and son ever saw eye to eye. My mother is acquainted with the late earl’s sister, and she apparently complained often of her nephew’s disrespectful attitude towards her brother.’

‘All that aside,’ says his husband Lord Brian, pushing back the wave of dark hair that falls repeatedly into his eyes, ‘His Lordship has had assurances that the earl shall be abstaining from dancing or any other form of frivolous entertainment tonight. Apparently, he has asked only for a short audience after dinner, before he takes his leave.’

‘Whatever for?’ Sympathy aside, Will has no desire to see Hannibal cornered by the morose earl.

‘Perhaps to pass on some keepsake or other,’ suggests Lord James. ‘Their fathers were boyhood friends, I believe, although in later years they had nothing to do with one another.’

Will shakes his head in amusement. ‘How do you come to know so much about everyone?’

It is not as if either of the Lords Price hail from that significantly older generation - why the elder, James, cannot be above thirty.

Lord Brian winks at him. ‘We entertain constantly and listen diligently. Be glad that you are away from all of that, Mr Graham. When one hears nothing but idle tattle from morning until night, it is easy to forget that people are intrinsically good.’

‘I am glad, indeed,’ murmurs Will, looking down the table to where Hannibal is conversing with a smiling Lady Bloom.

The count is easily the most handsome person in the room, and Will feels a surge of pride at his lover’s noble bearing. Chestnut hair waves softly above his ears, tapering shorter at the nape, making Will’s fingers itch to bury themselves in the glossy strands, to grip their thickness as he has done so many times in the fervent heat of passion...

‘You do not miss the intrigues and excitement of London?’

Blinking, he returns his attention to Lord Brian. ‘Not for a moment. I have found the beauties of the country to be ample distraction. And while it is true that the society here is somewhat narrower than in town, there is much to be said for quality over quantity.’

‘I hope that you count Lord James and myself among the former, else we shall have to quit town immediately!’ exclaims Lord Brian, affecting a look of mock horror which causes Will to chuckle out loud.

His laughing gaze returns to Hannibal, who is now watching *him* with a strangely arrested expression. It renders Will unaccountably flustered, although he flashes his lover a smile which is returned instantly. The tender moment serves to put from his mind the topic under discussion, and it is with no little effort that Will returns his full attention to those whom he has been tasked with entertaining.

***

When the last morsel of dessert has been consumed, the ladies are invited to go through into the library, while fat decanters containing port, claret and Madeira are brought in on silver trays for the gentlemen. Will is intent on his task of pouring claret for Mason Verger and Lord Bloom, rich ruby liquid swirling through refracted crystal, when he is nudged by Lord Brian.

‘It looks as if the new Lord Wyvern could not wait for his audience.’

‘What do you -’ Looking around, Will realises that neither Hannibal nor Lord Wyvern are present, and he berates his lack of attentiveness. ‘Where did they go?’

Lord Brian thumbs in the direction of the rear doors, at the other side of which lies the Sculpture Gallery. ‘Not to worry. His Lordship shall hear whatever Wyvern has to say on his late papa’s behalf, and *we* shall be rid of the dullard’s presence all the sooner.’

‘Which dullard is this?’ Eyes twinkling, Mason holds up a hand. ‘Wait, let me guess. The one who not so long ago was trailing a black cloud around with him all through our dinner party at Boarham Hall?’

‘Alright, you two.’ Lord James ambles up, eyes signalling mild warning. ‘Remember that you have an audience. I suggest a change of subject.’

In truth, with the rest of the gentlemen lounging in small clusters around the room, no one seems to be paying *them* any mind at all. Yet Will is glad of the interruption. There is something about Lord Wyvern - a dark sourness - that hints at hidden malevolence. He cannot be too soon forgot.

***

Two glasses of claret later, Will checks his pocket watch and frowns at the realisation that Hannibal has been absent now for almost half an hour. Even the usually poker-faced Chilton, hovering by the entrance, wears an expression of distinct vexation, and Will beckons him over.

‘Chilton, are the musicians ready?’

While card tables have been set up in the library, the Painted Hall has again been cleared for dancing, with refreshment tables lining the frescoed walls.

‘They are, Mr Graham, but it is for His Lordship to open the proceedings.’

Mouth firming, Will sets down his glass. ‘Then I shall go and fetch him. If we wait much longer, we shall be in danger of running out of wine.’

Chilton’s eyes flash relief, then in a blink he is back to stately solemnity. ‘Very good, sir. I shall send down for another few cases just to be on the safe side.’

With Chilton dispatched, there is nothing to be done except go in pursuit of Hannibal and Lord Wyvern, and hope that the interruption does not cause offence. As he reaches the rear doors, Will is intercepted by Mason.

‘Mr Graham, is all well?’

‘Perfectly.’ Will meets Mason’s questioning gaze with a reassuring smile. ‘I thought that I would check on His Lordship and Lord Wyvern. I am sure that they have simply forgot the time, but poor Chilton is fretting about the lack of progress. If I just put my head in, with any luck Lord Wyvern will take the hint and leave. Would you do me a favour and keep an eye on things here?’

Mason regards him with warm approval. ‘Your initiative does you credit, Graham. Fear not,’ and he claps a hand to Will’s shoulder. ‘I shall endeavour to keep order in your absence. Now off you go and rescue your chevalier from his dismal captor. I have no doubt he will thank you for it!’

With a final smile of gratitude for the viscount, Will pushes open one of the double doors, slipping through into the vestibule beyond and closing the door quietly behind him.

He can hear the echo of voices in the Sculpture Gallery, low in tone but imbued with a curious intensity. Taking care to tread silently, Will pauses behind a statue just within the main chamber, that he might listen undetected and assess the situation before venturing further.

'Well, sir? What say you?' It is Lord Wyvern, voice as full of malice as Will has ever heard it. 'Shall you do the sensible thing and save the honour of your precious family name, or do I go directly to the newspapers and the law courts?'

Hannibal's responding laugh is harsh. 'By your own account, Wyvern, I have little choice. Yet I would ask for some time to consider the fullness of your… *proposition*.'

'Very well,' sneers Lord Wyvern. 'I am not an unreasonable man. I shall grant you one week, Count Lecter, at the end of which you *will* give me your answer. For now, I take my leave. Do not bother to see me out. I can find my own way.'

As the earl strides away towards the orangery, Will leans back against the statue, gripped by a wave of dizziness, hands clapped over his mouth to stifle a hiss of shock. Whatever he had been expecting, it had not been this. *Blackmail*? It is too horrible. And for one awful moment, he is overwhelmed by the terrible fear that the tranquility of his life at Lecter House has just come to an abrupt end.

Love affair

It is the tiniest of sounds - little more than a suppressed intake of breath - but it is enough to alert Hannibal to the fact that someone has intruded on his privacy. And given the very grave nature of the conversation that has just taken place, it is essential that he discovers at once who it is and what they have heard.

‘What the deuce are you doing in here? Show yourself immediately!’

The reprimand dies on Hannibal's lips, however, as a flushed Will peers over the shoulder of the armoured Mars.

'For the love of - why are you hiding over there?'

Will's approach is wary, although his riposte is spirited enough. 'I was not hiding. I merely wished to avoid interrupting your conversation.'

'It was not really much of a conversation,' mutters Hannibal grimly. 'How much did you hear?'

Will looks back at him steadily. 'Enough to know that you are being blackmailed.'

Hannibal's fingers tighten around the document held within his fist. After a moment's hesitation, he folds it and tucks it away in his pocket. At Will's frown, he says abruptly, 'Now is not the time to discuss this. I have already been away from the party unpardonably long. How are our guests?'

'Waiting for you to open the dancing.' Will's hand touches his sleeve. 'Hannibal, let me help you.'

'I fear that it is not in your power to do so.' But oh, how the offer tugs at his heart. On impulse, Hannibal lifts Will's hand and bends his head to press a kiss to its warm palm. 'But I shall confide in you, that I promise.'

'Very well then.' And with a tentative smile, Will curls his fingers around Hannibal's. 'Come dance with me, and put whatever this is from your mind until tomorrow.'

'I can think of nothing that I would rather do.'

For a moment, they simply look at one another. Then, on a shuddering sigh, Hannibal pulls Will into his arms. They melt together, and he buries his nose in fragrant curls. All that he wants is to forget Lord Wyvern and his poisonous allegations. Lose himself in the sweetness and sensuality of his boy. And he resolves that for this one night, at least, he shall. Come what may tomorrow, tonight is for *them*.

***

'You know, Lecter, I envy you. And I am not speaking of this house or the fact that this is only one of half a dozen estates under your purview.'

Mason, having detached himself at last from an octopus-like Mr Brown, drops into a chair - one of several placed strategically around the Painted Hall for the benefit of wearied dancers and their aching feet - and downs with gusto the glass of punch that he has just procured.

'Careful,' warns Hannibal, looking down at his perspiring friend with raised brows. 'That is not apple juice, you know. And what the deuce are you talking about?'

'Not what. Whom. Our Mr Graham!' With a wave of his arm, Mason indicates the floor, where Will is currently dancing a merry reel with Lord Brian Price. 'Meg's idea of the birthday present was all very well, but who could have foreseen what an asset he would turn out to be? His conversation is neither lacking nor trite, and he has the most tremendous sense of humour. Do you know, a half hour ago he even managed to coax a laugh from our grave and stately Lord Lieutenant!'

'Did he indeed?'

‘And,’ continues Mason, ‘he is devilishly talented with a pencil. Look.’ From a pocket, he produces a comical sketch of himself: red quiff exaggeratedly high, eyes enormous, snub nose curled upwards at a startling angle. ‘He has been sketching caricatures on request.’

‘He is an angel at the pianoforte as well,’ murmurs Hannibal, gaze fond on the boy whose poise and elegant turns render him a pleasure to watch.

‘Oh, I say.’

At Mason’s awestruck tone, Hannibal finally tears his gaze from Will, who has just executed a perfect finishing bow. ‘What is it?’

‘Well,’ gesturing ebulliently, ‘*you*. I never would have thought to see the day.’

‘What day? Verger, exactly how deep in your cups are you?’ asks Hannibal, amusement edging into exasperation.

Mason looks at him askance. ‘You will not, I hope, pretend to be ignorant of my meaning. Certainly you cannot deny the depth of your feelings.’

‘The depth of my -’ Comprehension dawns but slowly; repudiation is far swifter. ‘Try not to be ridiculous. Naturally I am pleased with the boy; he is an attentive companion and a first-rate conversationalist.’ Determination to punish his friend for his presumption, and anger which lingers still from his interview with Wyvern, push Hannibal into coarseness as he adds, ‘More importantly, he is as you once surmised - a sensational fuck.’

‘How nice of you to say so.’

Oh, how could he have been so careless? Ice trickling down Hannibal’s spine, he pivots to find himself pinned by eyes of glacial blue. As Mason rises with a hastily-muttered excuse, Hannibal squares his shoulders in anticipation of the coming onslaught. But before one word can be uttered between them, Margot appears and lays a hand on Will’s shoulder. Her expression of reproof is all for Hannibal, but when she speaks it is in a voice soft with sympathy.

‘Would you care to dance the last with me, Mr Graham?’

At Will’s abrupt, ‘I would, very much,’ Hannibal realises with a sinking heart that his hopes of ending this most trying of nights in his lover’s arms have just been squarely dashed.

And it is entirely his own doing.

***

‘Apologise,’ is Mason’s whispered advice as he leans out of the Verger carriage window an hour later. ‘Tell him how you truly feel.’

‘And how is that?’ Hannibal asks stiffly. ‘Pray, do tell.’

‘Oh, Lecter.’ Mason’s expression is a mixture of incredulity and amusement. ‘Whether you are at odds or not, the pair of you positively light up in each other’s presence. You are in the midst of a genuine love affair and you do not even know it!’

From the bowels of the carriage, Lord Boarham issues an irritable instruction to the driver; Mason hastily withdraws his head; and in the next instant the carriage pulls away, leaving Hannibal to brood

over words which, although undoubtedly fanciful, seem somehow to have set his heart drumming to the most peculiar rhythm.

***

A drink seems in order. Predictably, there is no sign of Will when Hannibal walks back into the house, and Chilton informs him quietly that Mr Graham has retired for the night.

‘Very well. Is there any brandy about, Chilton?’

‘I shall find some, my lord.’

‘Thank you. I shall take it in the library.’

***

But the mellow liquor is small consolation for the empty space beside him on the sofa, and Hannibal’s head is thudding dully by the time he abandons the bottle and trudges up to his bedchamber.

The bed is singularly unoccupied, and the connecting door is closed. A more effective beratement Will could not have chosen: Hannibal has not been parted from his boy for a single night since the party at Boarham Hall, and his heart is leaden at the prospect of returning to his solitary state. He approaches the door, raises his hand to knock, and hesitates. In the next moment, Randall appears on the landing, a freshly-laundered nightshirt over his arm. Swiftly, Hannibal moves away.

‘Yes, Randall?’

‘Would you care to undress now, my lord?’

‘Ah, yes - that is, leave it with me, Randall. I shall shift for myself tonight.’

Randall seems to have sensed his master’s turbulent state of mind. His manner is subdued, his response muted. Draping the nightshirt over a chair, he withdraws, the door latch clicking softly behind him.

A muffled sound draws Hannibal back to the connecting bedroom door. He stands still, listening, but discerns nothing further. On a harsh sigh, he pulls himself away again and begins the task of disrobing. He fumbles at buttons and ties, careless with the fine materials, wanting only to rid himself of them and the memories of a most unpleasant evening. Then, just as he has pulled on his nightshirt, he hears the sound again. And this time, he recognises it. A sob, deep and raw. Self-pitying thoughts abandoned, led purely by instinct, he strides to the inner door and wrenches it open. It takes only the sight of the boy - knees pulled up inside his nightshirt, a ball of misery in the centre of the bed - to drive from Hannibal’s head all considerations but one: to offer comfort.

Swiftly, he crosses to the bed and climbs onto it. Without saying a word, he curls his body around Will and presses his cheek to the boy’s hair. Stiffening at first, Will relaxes in increments, although stubbornly he hides his face against Hannibal’s chest.

‘I was a bear tonight,’ admits Hannibal, stroking gentle fingers down his boy’s back. ‘I was rude and inconsiderate. It was unpardonable behaviour.’

‘Why?’ The hoarseness of Will’s voice is a reproach in itself, a testament to the depth of his distress.

‘I was - embarrassed.’ It is a difficult admission. ‘Mason is so damnably impertinent. My words were cruel and stupid, but I thought only to put an end to his conjectures.’

‘I see.’

A hand comes up to wipe surreptitiously at tear-streaked cheeks. Hannibal’s heart clenches at the sight.

‘Will, I -’

On a groan, he gathers the boy more tightly to him. Words tremble on his lips - words that he dare not utter, that he cannot *trust*.

An image of his mother, contrite after yet another extended stay in the capital, fussing around his father, scattering words of love like petals. Only to disappear again after a week - sometimes a mere handful of days. The count finding solace in his mistress, leaving his son perplexed as to the nature of this emotion which both parents saw fit to pay mouth honour to, yet which their actions so often made a mockery of.

Yet when Will turns anguished eyes to him, fingers knitting in the front of his nightshirt, anchoring them together, all bitter thoughts dissolve and there is only *Will*, warm and needful and entirely beautiful.

‘I am sorry.’ Hannibal’s gaze falls to rosebud lips. ‘Allow me to make amends, my darling.’

‘How?’ The husky challenge is heartening evidence that his boy is rallying.

‘Well, to begin with…’ He dips his head, eyes intent, and whispers against Will’s mouth, ‘You might allow me to kiss you.’

There is the slightest tremor of a smile. ‘Would not that be equal reward for you?’

Such delightful effrontery is certainly encouraging but rather than claim his prize, Hannibal draws back a little. ‘I cannot deny it. But the question is, would it please you?’ He cannot help but add, ‘You have, after all, turned from every one of my previous overtures.’

‘I know.’ Will spreads his palm over Hannibal’s heart as he mumbles, ‘Force of habit.’

The significance of these words is startling. Hannibal covers Will’s hand with his own. ‘Will, are you saying that you have never -’

Blue eyes meet his sheepishly. ‘Never.’

Of course, for any other seventeen-year-old, such a fact would hardly be revelatory. But given Will’s history…

‘I see your surprise,’ continues Will, a trace of defensiveness creeping into his tone, ‘but it was the one thing I promised myself I would keep for - well, I shall just say that my previous admirers were interested chiefly in being serviced. And that was fine. But this,’ slipping free his hand and tracing his fingers across the bow of Hannibal’s upper lip, ‘this is intimate. This is earned.’ He shrugs. ‘They never earned it.’

‘But I have?’

‘Perhaps.’ It is almost a whisper.

As much as Hannibal longs to sweep away all uncertainty and press his lips to Will’s, to test their softness and fit, to *take* as he pleases - as he is so used to doing - instinct tells him that to act in so high-handed a manner would destroy something infinitely precious. A growing trust, fragile still, in need of careful nurture.

Exhaling softly, he leans his forehead against Will’s. ‘I shall be content to wait until you are sure. And in the meantime, let my penance for tonight’s infraction be exacted in whichever way you see fit.’

A fine tremor runs through the boy in his arms. ‘Well then. Take me to your bed. Please.’

Words have run dry. What remains is solace, tender and reverent. Hannibal carries the boy, legs wrapped around his waist, back through to his bed. There they lie down and press together, exchanging caresses that linger, softness growing rougher as cloth barriers are rucked up to bare them both from the waist, allowing them to rut together fiercely.

Hannibal hitches up Will’s smooth thigh and fingers him open, murmuring praise against his skin, pushing aside the wide neckline of his nightshirt to tongue hard little nipples. Foreplay is brief, almost perfunctory, for the tension humming in Hannibal’s blood demands imminent release. And Will seems just as desperate for assuagement, taking him in hand and guiding him inside almost greedily. They writhe together, chasing that moment of dazzling pleasure in which all else is forgotten; when it comes, Hannibal groans Will’s name, over and over. He collapses between sticky thighs and lays his cheek against soft cotton over Will’s heart. And tries desperately to beat back thoughts of the trials to come.

***

‘Tell me about Lord Wyvern’s blackmail scheme.’

In the wooded hills above the house, they walk side by side, along a trail that winds, snake-like, up to the hunting tower. Trees cluster, soaring oaks and horse chestnuts and pine, casting pockets of shade between squares of hard, brilliant light. Their boots, dust-covered after the first mile, crunch on packed earth littered with twigs and stones.

Will, so quiet and patient as they had dressed that morning, no doubt mindful of Randall’s presence - and then again over breakfast as Chilton had tutted at plates barely touched - now turns on Hannibal blue eyes darkened in concern, soft in sympathy to a plight he could not possibly guess at.

To have to speak of it - even here, where there can be no interruption or unwelcome eavesdropper - goes against every natural instinct Hannibal has to bury the ugly story and bury it deep. But last night he had made a solemn promise to share it - to trust Will with the whole truth, however vile. He cannot betray his word. And so, sighing, Hannibal finally relents.

‘It is a tale of woe that concerns my father - and his mother.’

‘Lady Wyvern?’ Will’s brow wrinkles. ‘I do not recall ever hearing him mention her. Is she -’

‘She died long ago, on my fifth birthday as it happens. I remember being told about it some years afterwards. My mother had planned a party and all the guests were assembled in the Painted Hall. After the message came, Papa demanded that everyone be sent away at once. Mama refused. It was not,’ ends Hannibal wryly, ‘the best of days.’

‘I can well imagine.’ Will’s countenance turns incredulous. ‘You do not mean to say that Lord Wyvern holds your family responsible in some way for his mother’s death?’

‘If only it were so simple. His accusations, his - claims - purport to an infamous chapter in our history that most outside the family believe to be mere myth. Here,’ as they draw near a broken-down stone wall, ‘let us sit and I will tell it all.’

They stop, removing their coats to drape them across the moss-cushioned surface. Will’s thigh is warm against Hannibal’s own, a small comfort but enough to remind him that he is not alone. Thus, heart anchored safely to the present, Hannibal allows his mind to drift back to the murky and treacherous past.

‘It was my mother who first told me the tale, the spring when I was just fourteen. We were sitting together in the bandstand above her grotto - a rare occasion, for always it seemed she was flying off to London or Bath or Paris, but she had come back to Derbyshire for my birthday. And the next day, she took me out into the gardens for a picnic. I recall that she was very pale, despite the clement weather. I did not know it then, but her heart had been much weakened by a bout of rheumatic fever in childhood, and by this time she had but a few months to live. I suspect that she knew the gravity of her situation and wished to begin preparing me by laying open a family secret that she knew my father would not feel any inclination to disclose.’

‘I have seen your mother’s portraits in the house. She was beautiful. You take after her, I think.’

Hannibal smiles grimly. ‘Yes, she was beautiful. And thoughtless and fickle and charming.’ His sigh is harsh. ‘But I can tell you of my mother some other day. This is a tale that revolves around two other principals: my father, Filip Lecter, and Wyvern’s mother, Violet. The story goes that they met many years ago at Bath, and quickly formed an attachment which dismayed their families considerably, for both were promised already: my father to my mother, Simonetta, and Violet to Wyvern’s father, Robert Hyde. My father was then already thirty, and was marrying under duress, that he might assure the continuation of the family line by producing an heir. Violet’s engagement was of a similar nature: both were bound by duty. She was removed from Bath by her family, who brought her back to Derbyshire, and my father took an extended trip to the continent in an effort to forget about her.’

‘But he could not?’

‘You have guessed it. And upon their meeting again months later, the attachment which they had formed in Bath proved to be stronger than their resolve. A rumour circulated that they had been seen together coming out of an inn on the road between their two houses - desperation was making them careless. With time running out they decided to elope, and my father travelled to London to procure a special licence.’ Hannibal shakes his head. ‘It shames me more than I can say to know that he stood before the Archbishop of Canterbury and gave his word of honour that his bride had permission for such a marriage.’

‘Your father was an aristocrat but he was also a man, as fallible as any other,’ comes the soft reminder.

‘Fallible?’ Broodingly, Hannibal picks at a clump of moss. ‘He was certainly that, with one bride deceived and the other facing the prospect of permanent estrangement from her family. He came away from London having succeeded in obtaining the licence, procured the services of a clergyman in a village on the outskirts of the parish, and after spending a final night together in the inn which had been the scene of goodness knows how many trysts, they were married here in Derbyshire early the next morning.’

‘But surely that is not possible.’ Will’s laugh is uneasy. ‘Your own parents -’

‘Oh, my parents too were married, right here in our family chapel. But which was the *legitimate* union? Therein, Will, lies the question. According to what I had always believed, Violet was on her wedding day five days short of her twenty-first year. Without her parents’ permission, the marriage would have been invalidated.’

Will shakes his head, confusion writ large in his expressive face. ‘Why, then, did not your father and Violet simply wait another five days before marrying?’

‘Because Violet’s birthday was also the date set for my parents’ wedding day.’ Hannibal’s smile is bleak. ‘A cruel trick of Fate. The lovers no doubt thought to steal away before that unalterable event could take place. Perhaps they thought that if they could elude their jailers for long enough to ensure a child, then their parents would be forced to support the match rather than expose both families to ruination.’

‘Obviously something prevented them.’

‘Indeed. Violet’s lady’s maid, whom she had mistakenly taken into her confidence, betrayed her to the family, and the couple were intercepted in the church as the vicar uttered the final words of blessing. You may imagine what followed. They were separated immediately and my father was shamed into giving up any further notion of breaking his promise to my mother. Five days later, my parents’ wedding took place as planned. Violet’s union with Wyvern’s father followed soon afterwards.

Will sighs. ‘Perhaps it is wrong but I feel badly for them - your father and Violet, I mean. To have been forced into loveless matches… That is, I do not mean to imply that your father never -’

‘Loved my mother?’ Returning Will’s anxious gaze, Hannibal reaches out and strokes soothingly down one smooth cheek. ‘Do not distress yourself on my account. I do not think that I shall ever understand the precise nature of my parents’ relationship. Both, at times, showed each other great affection. Both, at times, strayed. But there was never any question of their separating. And when my mother died, I do believe that my father mourned her loss sincerely.’

Will’s hand covers his for a moment. ‘I am sorry, Hannibal. I know what it is to be the product of an unsuitable match.’ He kicks at the ground. ‘I know it all too well.’ Then, ‘Is this what Lord Wyvern was threatening to expose? But why should anyone care now?’ His brow creases. ‘He spoke of law courts. What has the law to do with it?’

How cheerless is the prospect of what Hannibal must next relate. Restless suddenly, he stands up and extends his hand to Will. ‘Come, let us walk again a little.’

With their coats folded over their arms, they proceed in silence along the gradually ascending path, and Hannibal is grateful for the minor respite. But the worst is still to come, and like poison from a wound it must be drawn in its entirety. Thus, after a few minutes of gazing absently at their surroundings - nodding foxgloves and frilled bracken and the odd strutting pheasant - he draws from his pocket the folded sheet which Lord Wyvern had brandished at him the previous evening.

‘You asked me before whether Wyvern was threatening to reveal the truth publicly. The answer is that were it all as straightforward as I have indicated - as, indeed, I had always believed it to be - then there would be little for him to gain by resurrecting an old, sad story of thwarted love except perhaps some temporary titillation amongst the ton.

Will’s footsteps have slowed. ‘He believes that there is more?’

‘Oh, that he does.’ Hannibal laughs - short and humourless. ‘And what he believes to be the true version of events, he is bound and determined to be granted monetary recompense for - or else reveal to his brace of lawyers, not to mention the general populace.’ They stop and he unfolds the paper, fingers smoothing out the creases. ‘This is a copy of a document which Wyvern claims to have unearthed from among his late father’s possessions.’ He holds it out for Will’s perusal.

‘The special marriage licence?’

‘The very same. My father had apparently entrusted it to Violet’s keeping; after her death, it must have been discovered by her husband. Wyvern has made use of a copying press to produce this - it is a reversed image, and not the highest quality, but it supports his argument most admirably.’

Will scans the document and then looks up in puzzlement. ‘What argument? This surely fits the narrative that you have told me in every respect.’

‘Every respect but one. Look at the date.’ Hannibal hands the paper to Will. ‘There at the bottom of the page.’

‘*Given under the seal of our Office of Faculties*,’ reads Will, ‘*this fifteenth day of August in the Year of our Lord, One Thousand Seven Hundred and eighty-nine*.’ Looking up, ‘I do not understand. What is strange about this?’

‘What is strange about it,’ repeats Hannibal slowly, ‘is that according to my mother, Filip and Violet’s ceremony took place on the *eleventh* of August, not the sixteenth as this document suggests: remember, they were married on the morning after the licence was obtained. That fact is not in dispute.’

‘But the date of the wedding is.’ Will lifts grave eyes to Hannibal’s. ‘If on the eleventh, Violet was five days from her twenty-first birthday, then the sixteenth was the day of her majority. Hannibal, on what date were your parents married?’

Ah, now we come to it.

‘The sixteenth of August, at eleven o’clock.’

‘Then I believe I know the answer to my next question,’ admits Will, ‘but for the sake of clarity, what exactly is Lord Wyvern alleging?’

Stopping in the middle of the path, agitation rising, Hannibal rakes a hand through his hair. ‘Is not it obvious?’ He cannot keep the bitterness from spilling. ‘That my father and Violet did, in fact, marry on the morning of her twenty-first birthday. That they were discovered, and that this first union was subsequently hushed up by their furious parents, who threatened the disinheritance of one and the exile of the other should they refuse to proceed with their original matches. Such, at any rate, was Wyvern’s version of events, as related to me last night with *great* relish.’

Will’s eyes are flashing fury. ‘You mean he *dares* to suggest that your parents’ marriage was not legitimate?’

‘And that I am therefore a bastard,’ finishes Hannibal with grim emphasis. ‘Not only that, but he hinted heavily at the possibility that he himself was the product of my father’s short-lived liaison with Violet, which would, of course, make *him* the true heir to Lecter House and all of our other estates.’

‘No,’ proclaims Will forcefully. ‘It cannot be.’

‘I wish that I were so sure.’ Hannibal’s expression is bleak as he takes the paper from Will’s unresisting hand. ‘It is hard to argue with so concrete a piece of evidence.’

‘Perhaps.’ Will’s eyes narrow. ‘Yet there is something about it that bothers me.’

‘The entire affair bothers me, but it does make an awful kind of sense,’ admits Hannibal heavily. ‘Was not it your own first thought that my father would have been better waiting to marry Violet when she no longer had need of her parents’ permission?’

‘Yes, but it makes equal sense that they would have chosen *not* to risk such a venture on the very day when both would have had all eyes upon them from the moment they rose from their beds.’ Contemplatively, Will eyes the document. ‘I cannot help but wonder whether Wyvern has attempted some mischief of his own here.’

Hannibal’s brows rise. ‘You think the licence to have been tampered with?’

‘Well, there is a deal of smudging on the copy, and so it is hard to be sure. But I think it entirely possible.’ Will touches his arm. ‘Hannibal, consider. It was your own mother who related the original story to you. Was she the sort of person to have colluded in a conspiracy of such magnitude?’

Flinching, Hannibal sets off walking again, yet no matter how fast his strides, he cannot outrun the hollowness of his feelings.

‘I wish that I could say no at once, but I saw little of her in the years before she died, and there was much of her life that was a mystery to me.’

‘What does your instinct tell you?’

This slows him again. ‘That when she recounted to me the story of the elopement, she was speaking the truth. Or, at least, the truth as she knew it. Who is to say that my mother was not also kept in ignorance?’

‘That is a good point,’ concedes Will. ‘Very well, then. If we put aside your mother’s version of events, what remains? The word of a man whose unpleasantness makes my skin crawl whenever we are in the same room, and an imperfect copy of a document that could very well have been doctored. No, it is too neat. Too convenient.’

They have ascended the brow of the hill, and the woodland opens up before them to reveal at last the hunting tower, a pale column rising through the trees.

‘Let us stop here a while,’ says Hannibal, heading off down a divergent path that leads directly to the base of the hunting tower. ‘We can take some refreshment in the kitchen.’

The tower’s sole outer door is accessed via a short flight of stone steps, at either side of which stand squat urns. Hannibal tips one on its side, revealing a key concealed at its base. This he retrieves, and climbing the steps he slots it into the lock. It is a tight fit, and the door protests loudly as he pushes it open.

‘It has been a while since anyone stayed here, but I have given orders to keep the place well stocked, and it should certainly suffice for a brief sojourn.’

The cool interior provides immediate relief from the insistent June heat. As Will takes a seat on the long bench which runs the length of the rustic central table, Hannibal hunts through cupboards, finally brandishing with triumph a corked bottle.

‘LeBeau’s cider. Just what we need.’ He looks around the bare surfaces with a frown. ‘Now where the deuce are the glasses?’

‘Why do we have need of any? We can share.’ Will extends his hand, eyes soft. ‘Come sit beside me.’

Such an offer is irresistible, and gladly Hannibal goes to him, sliding onto the bench beside him and uncorking the bottle which emits a loud *pop*. Immediately, the heady aroma of pressed apples fills the room. Offering the bottle first to Will, he grins as the boy takes a draught and gasps, cheeks flushing immediately.

‘Careful. It is a potent concoction, and we are too far from the house for me to carry you back.’

‘I am quite able to hold my drink, thank you,’ retorts Will, and as if to prove it he takes another long swig before handing the bottle back to Hannibal.

The first burst of sweetness brings blissful warmth, easing the tension from Hannibal’s limbs. He takes more, savouring the tang. They pass the bottle back and forth, and soon they are leaning against each other, sipping slowly, languor stealing in. It is a welcome respite, yet the spectre of Lord Wyvern is not banished easily, and soon Hannibal falls again to gloomy abstraction.

‘If it is a deception, then it is well carried-out, and Wyvern is a finer actor than I could have believed possible.’

‘Hmph. I would far rather believe that you had underestimated Lord Wyvern than that his vile story contains even a grain of truth. What we need is a record of the marriage that he cannot possibly have interfered with.’ Brightening, Will exclaims, ‘I have it! The parish register. There is your proof.’

‘You forget,’ says Hannibal gently, ‘the ceremony was halted immediately after the final blessing, which means that the register had not yet been signed. No, Wyvern chose his weapon well. The special licence is the only existing proof of the validity - or lack thereof - of the marriage.’

Will slumps back against him. ‘Are there no living witnesses who could testify to the truth of the matter? What of the clergyman who married them?’

‘Certainly I could make enquiries. But even if he could be traced, is it likely that he would recall the specific date more than two decades after the fact? And even if he could, I suspect that my grandfather would have paid handsomely to ensure his silence.’

‘Perhaps, but it is surely a lead still worthwhile pursuing,’ insists Will.

Hannibal smiles at this characteristic show of stubbornness, and tilts his head to rest his cheek against Will’s hair. ‘Yes, it is. And I shall, I promise.’

‘Is there anyone else who might remember anything?’

‘Unlikely. My grandparents are long dead, as are Wyvern’s. When we were up at Oxford together, he used to complain before every vacation that his only company at home would be a drunken father and a shrewish maiden aunt.’

‘An aunt?’ Will hums thoughtfully. ‘Lord James spoke briefly of her last night when we were discussing Lord Wyvern’s return into society so soon after his father’s death. From Lord James’ words, I was given to understand that the aunt is still living. Apparently, his mother is acquainted with her, and from what I understand the aunt has little love for the nephew. Could a meeting be arranged, do you think?’

‘We are to dine with the Lords Price tomorrow, before they depart for London. I shall see what can be done.’ Hannibal plucks up Will’s hand from where it rests on the table, and raises it to his lips. ‘Thank you, little ladybird.’ He brushes a kiss against the back, feeling Will’s reactionary shiver and repeating the action for good measure.

‘There is something else,’ says Will, looking pleased and pink-cheeked as he takes up the bottle again, turning it absently between his fingers. ‘I might know of someone who could verify that the licence has been meddled with.’ A slight hesitation follows. ‘Lord Sutcliffe’s steward Mr Budge is, by all accounts, an expert in the field of fraud. He was trained in the law before opening his own practice as a solicitor. Unfortunately, that practice fell into bankruptcy after his apprentice decided to turn his hand to defrauding clients rather than helping them. Mr Budge was cleared of all involvement but decided on a change of career. Lord Sutcliffe discovered his talent when the steward caught a servant stealing cheques and forging their master’s name. Budge has an impressive record of exposing such things, by all accounts. If I should write to Lord Sutcliffe and -’

‘Absolutely not.’ Hannibal does not intend the harshness with which he bites out the words, but the mention of the baron’s name has produced feelings of such intense revulsion that for a moment, he feels positively nauseous. The idea of *that man* laying eyes - or *hands* - on Will again… ‘On no account are you to do any such thing. My private affairs are not for consumption by the likes of him.’

‘But Sutcliffe would be merely the intermediary,’ protests Will. ‘A way of introduction.’

‘*I said no*.’ This time, it is an eruption that Hannibal cannot contain. Slamming his hands on the table, he pushes to his feet and glowers down at his young lover. ‘I forbid it, Will, do you understand? I *forbid* it.’

Perfectly impossible

The atmosphere in the little kitchen has turned to ice.

‘You *forbid* it? Do you think me a child to be slapped down and reminded of my place? My idea is sound! You shall not even let me try?’

A hard knot of tension twists in Will’s stomach as slowly he rises to confront Hannibal, who glares back at him, mouth set in a tight line.

‘Does not it occur to you that I have resources of my own?’ Hannibal’s tone takes on a note of infuriating haughtiness. ‘That I am perfectly capable of hiring someone myself? Better still, I shall instruct my lawyers to do so. That is, after all, why I pay them extortionate sums each month.’

The knot of tension is now a ball of flame.

‘You pompous ass!’ Grabbing his coat, Will heads towards the door.

‘Where exactly do you think you are going?’

‘Back to the house,’ he snaps, ‘since it seems that you have no more need of my help.’

He does not wait for an answer but wrenches at the doorknob. The door judders open, and in his haste and slightly tipsy state, Will practically tips out onto the top step. Gravity takes him at once, and with a surprised yelp he finds himself pitching forward. Mercifully, he manages to stumble down the short flight, landing on his hands and knees on the grass below. Shock renders him immobile for a few moments, and the next thing he knows is that Hannibal is crouching beside him, saying his name in a tone much altered from their last exchange.

‘Will, dear gods, are you injured?’

He scowls, ignoring the hand that is proffered, and pushes himself back up into a sitting position.

‘I am fine. Do not fuss.’

His breeches have taken some scuffing, and his palms sting slightly, but the biggest bruise is unquestionably to his pride. Hannibal sinks down onto the grass and lets out a ragged sigh.

‘Then please be more careful. When I watched you disappear like that -’

Will looks at him sharply. ‘I would not have *disappeared* if you had been less of a - a -’

‘Pompous ass?’

Despite his determination to cling to righteous anger, Will feels it draining from him. A reluctant smile tugs at his lips.

‘Well, you must own that you were at the least a little bombastic.’

‘Perhaps a very little.’ Serious suddenly, Hannibal leans towards him and tucks a curl behind his ear. The gesture causes Will’s heart to flutter in the most ridiculous manner. ‘I apologise, Will. You were thinking only of me, and I allowed my ego to get in the way of good sense. Of course you may write to the baron.’

Still a note of strain remains, and Will chews on his lip, debating how to dispel it. ‘It will give me no pleasure to do so,’ he says softly at last, ‘other than in knowing that it may help your cause.’

Their eyes meet and they move at almost the same instant. Gladly, Will melts into Hannibal’s embrace, twining his arms around his lover’s neck.

‘I do not like it when we quarrel.’

‘Nor I. Although the making up is rather nice.’

Will pulls back and eyes Hannibal severely. ‘Are you attempting to evade the issue?’

‘Are you attempting to begin another quarrel?’

Recognising this for the mild tease that it is, Will gives up and snuggles back into Hannibal’s arms.

‘You really are perfectly impossible,’ he sighs. ‘But I shall help you anyway. As soon as we return to the house, I intend to put pen to paper. We can have it sent by express.’

‘Better still, I shall hire a courier. Chilton can send for one from Bakewell.’ Sombreness returns to Hannibal’s voice as he adds, ‘Though I fear that there is little enough time for enquiries of any kind. We have only six days until Wyvern’s return, and it is a full day’s ride to London even on good roads.’

‘But Sutcliffe is not in London,’ interrupts Will. ‘That is, when I left him in May he was making preparations to return to Sutcliffe Hall.’

‘He is in Leicester? Then that shall shorten the journey considerably. The courier can be there and back in a day.’ Drawing back slightly, Hannibal bestows a smile that Will feels as a caress. ‘No matter the outcome of all this, I shall be greatly in your debt.’

‘It is nothing,’ Will protests, squirming away in embarrassment. ‘Please do not speak of debt. Lord Wyvern is attempting a great injustice, I am sure of it. It is only common decency to try to prevent such a thing.’

‘Very well.’ A kiss is pressed to his forehead. ‘The word shall not pass my lips again.’

Mollified, Will arranges himself so that he sits nestled within the circle of Hannibal’s arms, back to chest, his body bracketed by Hannibal’s raised knees. He draws up his own knees and gazes out across the valley to the wooded hills beyond.

‘Of course,’ he muses, ‘if Sutcliffe does grant us the services of Mr Budge, it would be better if we had the original licence for him to examine.’

‘Of course. But that is hardly something which Wyvern would be willing to give up.’

‘Not give up, but -’ A germ of an idea begins to form. ‘He could perhaps be induced to produce it as proof that his hand is as strong as he claims.’

‘If he has, indeed, doctored the original, I see no advantage to that. Neither you or I are experts in the field of forgery,’ Hannibal reminds him dryly.

Will clicks his tongue. ‘If you see no advantage, it is because you are not thinking as deviously as I.’

Hannibal leans forward and rests his chin on Will’s shoulder. His voice is a delicious rumble in Will’s ear.

‘Educate me, then.’

‘It is simple, really.’ Endeavouring to keep his mind on the plan that is forming rather than the proximity of the man who is wrapped around him, Will half closes his eyes as he pictures the scene. ‘As soon as Mr Budge is safely installed in Lecter House, you invite Lord Wyvern to dinner, and ask that he brings the licence so that you might see it for yourself. Call it a sign of good faith. We then proceed with the dinner, taking care that the wine flows freely. Before his departure, you are called away on some urgent matter of business, and while we wait I offer to show Lord Wyvern the new

ballroom. On our way back down, I mention the plunge bath and suggest taking a dip. This will, of course, necessitate the removal of our clothes. And while I... distract him, you swap the copy of the licence for the original. WIth any luck, by the time Lord Wyvern notices that a switch has been made, Mr Budge will have already examined the original document.'

'Wait just one moment.'

Will is ready for the protest, and he turns, words of placation on his lips. He is taken aback, however, by the sheer *fury* burning in Hannibal's eyes.

'If you think that I shall allow *any* man to see you unclothed, let alone -'

'Oh, for pity's sake, not this again.' Impatience renders Will reckless as he grasps the lapels of Hannibal's waistcoat and declares, 'I am no blushing virgin, my lord, whose virtue is in need of protection. Before your friend hired me to be your *plaything*, I had fucked my way through half the ton.' A gross exaggeration, perhaps, but the point still needs making. 'You have been kind to me - kinder than anyone I have ever known -' He stops, swallowing hard, before forcing himself to continue. 'But the truth of it is that come *next* summer, I shall be decorating the arm of another rich man. So please, let me help you in any way that I am able.'

For a moment, Hannibal stares at him as if he has never seen him before. And then it is as if a shutter drops. His hands close over Will's, peeling them away, and his voice is as remote as Will has ever heard it.

'You are right, of course. I was a fool to be overly solicitous. What does it matter if you bare yourself to the whole county? Feel free to fuck the good humour back into Wyvern while you are about it.'

'I did not mean -'

But before Will has even finished the sentence, Hannibal has risen to his feet and is striding off back down the path.

All that Will can do is follow in mortified silence, a leaden weight in his heart, desperate to undo the damage his words have clearly wrought. Yet to what end? His tenure at Lecter House is, after all, a temporary one, his relations with the count bound and defined by a written contract. Lately, it has been all too easy to forget these facts, the pull of Will's attraction to Hannibal threatening to leave his heart unguarded. Gods, he had almost allowed Hannibal to *kiss* him, the one rule he had set for himself and sworn to never break.

By the time they re-enter the house, Will is fully prepared to be cut adrift. He almost jumps at the peremptory command issued as Hannibal starts up the oak staircase.

'Come with me.'

Another silent march then follows, through the North Wing to a room at its furthest end, a high-ceilinged vault furnished simply with a large writing desk and cabinets of various sizes. This, Will realises as he enters cautiously, must be the estate office.

Hannibal, eyes hard, mouth taut, pulls out a chair from behind the desk and gestures brusquely. 'Sit.'

'Well, since you ask so charmingly,' Will cannot help but mutter as he slides into the seat. 'What now?'

Hannibal's gaze is frustratingly evasive as he sets down before him paper, pen, ink and blotter. 'Now,' he says curtly, 'you may write to your former lover.'

'Very well.' A measure of relief that this part of his plan at least has not been rejected is tempered by irritation at Hannibal's choice of phrasing. Determined, however, not to be provoked, Will takes up the pen and dips the nib in the provided inkwell. 'Shall I ask him to have Mr Budge travel here directly?'

'The sooner the better,' comes the terse reply. 'And please confine your correspondence to the business at hand. Time is of the essence.'

And before Will can summon a suitably waspish retort, Hannibal has stalked from the room, leaving him to complete his task alone.

***

The following afternoon sees the arrival of Mr Budge, a tall, slender gentleman of impeccable dress with a refined, quiet air. He bears a letter from Lord Sutcliffe which is addressed to Hannibal, and he acknowledges Will's presence with some bemusement.

'We had thought you to be at Bath, Mr Graham. His Lordship was most surprised to learn than you were now in Count Lecter's employ.'

'Employ, is it?' comes Hannibal's sardonic interjection.

Will flushes at this acid reminder of his final act of defiance: handing over the envelope already sealed, and thus denying Hannibal the chance to read the letter before it was sent.

'Would you have had me be more specific?' he asks tightly, before addressing Mr Budge. 'I might have left Lord Sutcliffe with the impression that I would be returning to my family at the end of the Season,' he admits, self-consciousness increasing beneath the weight of Hannibal's narrowed gaze, 'but my plans changed unexpectedly.'

The ticking of the library clock is almost deafening in the awkward silence that follows. Will realises with an unhappy start that he is waiting for Hannibal to come to his rescue, as he has done so many times before. Instead, the count regards him coldly before turning to their guest.

'Come, Mr Budge. First we shall have some tea, and then I shall apprise you of the situation in which I find myself.'

'I shall leave you to it, then,' Will says stiffly, mouth tightening as he is, predictably, ignored.

This, after all, has been the pattern for the last twenty-four hours. Meals taken in stony silence, recreation time spent apart. The night before, he had lain in his lonely bed and entertained fantasies of being roused by a warm body curling around his own, or a soft voice of apology at his ear asking him to return to the bed he has come to think of as equally his own. But such hopes had proven dismally false, and he had woken at dawn in the clutches of an aching forlornness that had proven impossible to shake off.

Feeling stifled, and needing to escape his own terrible yearnings, Will ventures from the house for the tranquility of the garden. There he wanders, allowing the hours to trickle by, until the chimes of the stable clock remind him that it is time to dress before dinner. Heartsore, weary, he makes his way

back to the house and trudges upstairs - only to find Hannibal standing in the middle of his bedchamber, arms crossed, eyes blazing.

‘Where the deuce have you been?’ he bites out.

‘Walking,’ is Will’s terse reply. He flops into a chair and proceeds to tug off his boots.

‘For five hours?’ Hannibal prowls nearer.

Will raises his brows, unbuttoning his coat and pulling it off with little care for the fine stitching before he begins working on the knot of his cravat. ‘I am surprised that you noticed my absence at all. I am doubly surprised that you care.’

‘It might have escaped your recollection,’ says Hannibal sharply, ‘but the Prices are joining us for dinner tonight. They will certainly be expecting to see you.’

‘Well, in that case I will be there,’ snaps Will as he unwinds the cravat and flings it aside. ‘It will be nice to spend time with people who are not glowering at me every moment.’

Next to endure such rough treatment is his waistcoat, followed swiftly by his shirt. Wrenching it off, he cannot help but notice the gleam of interest in Hannibal’s eyes. It is extinguished almost immediately, but it is enough to remind Will of the undeniable draw that exists between them. Time, perhaps, for a little revenge in payment for the past day and a half’s hostilities. He stands up, holding Hannibal’s gaze as he unfastens his breeches buttons, and then bends to push them down his legs. He kicks them off and stands erect again, naked now except for a pair of white silk stockings tied just above the knee with blue ribbons. Hannibal’s eyes flicker down, tension visible in the tic of his jaw, and Will permits himself the tiniest smirk.

‘What of Mr Budge?’ He feigns a yawn and stretches his arms high above his head, fingers interlinked as he rocks back on his toes. ‘Where will he dine tonight?’

‘With Crawford and Stammets.’ The words are ground out as slowly Hannibal advances.

‘And Lord Wyvern? Have you sent word yet to him?’

‘He was at home when my man called. He has agreed to join us for dinner tomorrow evening, and I believe he will bring the licence.’

‘That is good.’

‘Is it? I forget.’ Amber eyes regard him broodingly. ‘You stood thus that night at Quant's. A vain little thing, I thought, displaying his feathers. And then you looked at me.’ The breath seems to shudder from him. ‘And gods, how I wanted you. You could have named your price and I would have paid it. Even now, if you demanded it of me, I believe I would give you anything you desired if it meant I could keep having you.’

‘I do not renege on deals already done,’ flashes Will. ‘I keep company with those I choose, and my reasons for doing so are my own.’ He blinks, lashes spiking wet. ‘And I wanted you, too. I think I would have gone anywhere with you, had you asked.’

Hannibal reaches for him then, hands spreading possessively over his hips, and Will allows himself to be caught, resting his fingertips lightly atop his lover’s coat sleeves. His lover. Gods, he has missed him.

‘Is there something that you want now, my lord?’ He rocks gently back and forth, rubbing his cock to hardness against the growing bulge in Hannibal’s breeches. ‘Some distraction before dinner, perhaps?’

Hannibal slides one hand around to Will’s back, then lower, insinuating a finger to rub over the sensitive puckered skin of his entrance.

‘Still tight. I thought perhaps you might have been taking your pleasure elsewhere.’

Will takes a shuddering breath. ‘Because you left me alone for one night? You imagined me off being fucked by your eager stable boy, I suppose.’ He trails a hand down between them, fingertips grazing Hannibal’s erection. ‘Such an idea does not appear to repulse you, my lord. Are you certain that you do not wish to share me?’

His wrist is seized, and he is walked backwards rapidly towards the bed.

‘Wretched boy.’ Hannibal’s voice rasps against his skin. ‘Do you wonder why I did not come to you last night? After yesterday declaring your intention to look elsewhere as soon as our arrangement is over?’

‘My intention?’ Eyes growing wide, Will shakes his head in fierce denial. ‘I have no *intention* of the kind. It was a reminder, that is all. A reminder to myself as much as to you. Of what this is. Of what I am - to you.’ His voice dips to a whisper on the last words.

‘What you are?’ Hannibal’s voice is hard. ‘Why, you are just as you said. A plaything, pretty and amusing.’

‘And a sensational fuck. Yes, I know.’ Will laughs, a brittle sound. ‘Then by all means,’ unsteady fingers working free the buttons of Hannibal’s front fall, ‘take your pleasure from me now.’

Hannibal strokes from the slight dip of Will’s waist over round cheeks, and dips again between. ‘Only mine? You do not want me any more?’

The tears sting as Will drops to his knees. ‘I always want you.’

He pulls free Hannibal’s cock and opens his mouth wide to wrap his lips around the head, tongue laving the spot he knows will bring Hannibal quickly to the edge. Minutes pass with only the sounds of sucking and Hannibal’s harshening breaths, until rough fingers anchor in his hair and tug him off.

‘Get on the bed,’ rasps Hannibal, eyes passion-dark as he takes himself in hand and pumps his cock slowly.

There is oil in the top drawer of the dressing table. A whirling detour and Will grabs it, burning with impatience to be filled, to take Hannibal within him again. A mutual reclaiming that will allow him to forget, if even temporarily, the last miserable hours. He crawls onto the bed, stockings sliding against the coverlet, and positions himself, barely holding back a whine of need. Gods, how he wants it. A hard, thorough fucking on hands and knees. But only from Hannibal. No one else has come close to invoking this feverish want. Perhaps no one else ever will...

‘Go on.’ The roughness of Hannibal’s voice pulls him back to the present, betraying the count’s own fierce arousal. ‘Prepare yourself for me.’

They have done this before. Will displaying himself, oil-slicked fingertips circling and penetrating, just a couple because they both enjoy the sensation of Hannibal’s cock stretching him, sheathed tight.

This time, when he's ready, Will holds himself open, fingers pressing white into rounded flesh. Offering himself. Pleading. Dizzy with the need for reconnection. But all that he hears is the slow, slick slide of Hannibal's fist over his cock.

'Put it inside. Fuck me,' he whines.

There is a hiss of indrawn breath. 'Such a little slut you are.'

Will turns his head, seeking his lover's gaze, and this time he does nothing to hide the tears that swim in his eyes. *Only for you*. It is a vow unspoken, yet perhaps something of his feelings is communicated, for Hannibal comes to him then, eyes burning with a strange exultancy.

And as he arches over Will, rubbing just the tip of his cock across the sensitized entrance, he murmurs, 'Say my name. I want to hear it on your lips again.'

His hand is clamped on Will's thigh, preventing him from moving. Will makes a fretful sound.

'Hannibal.'

The hand moves up and around to pluck at pointed nipples. 'Again.'

Will is panting now, pleasure spiking as he is teased by the fingers at his nipples and the cockhead that breaches him slightly, only to withdraw and rub again against his winking rim.

'Hannibal,' he groans.

He is rewarded by a swift thrust that takes his breath, and a slow withdrawal that has him almost clawing at the bedcovers in frustration as he is left empty again.

'What do you want?' Lips against his ear suckle on the lobe, then the juncture between neck and shoulder. 'Tell me what to do.'

'You know.' It is a petulant whine, a protest against this pleasure-punishment.

Teeth graze his nape, and the fingers at his nipple tighten and twist. '*Tell me*.'

'*Fuck me*.' Will gropes for his own cock, leaking now onto the covers, but his hand is knocked aside. 'Hannibal, please.' He is almost sobbing the words. 'I need you, please. Fuck me. Fuck me. Fuck -'

And then Hannibal is heavy atop him, cockhead breaching, thrusting deep, and the thick slide renders Will frantic with pleasure. He writhes into every touch, groaning his appreciation of the hard fucking that slams them together over and over. Of the hand that strokes him relentlessly until sticky warmth spurts, ruining the bed that he will not be sleeping in tonight. Of the juddering heat that pulses inside him in rough and primitive claiming. And Will, still in the grip of his own rippling climax, clenches down.

'Do not go.' The cry sounds plaintive to his own ears.

Hannibal hushes him, stroking and nuzzling and whispering reassurance. Disengagement is gentle, gradual, and when at last they are separated, Will turns to curl into his lover's arms.

'Gods but you are beautiful,' murmurs Hannibal, yet regret tinges his voice. 'Will, what I said before -'

‘It does not matter.’

‘But it does.’ Cradled as if something precious, Will closes his eyes as light kisses are pressed against his dewy skin. ‘I think that you know already, but you are far more than a mere plaything to me.’

‘Hush.’ The rapid beating of Will’s heart threatens to drown out words which render him strangely panicked. It is too serious, too *real*. ‘Just hold me.’ He sighs. ‘I wish that we were not having company tonight. I would much rather stay here with you.’

‘Why? You want me again so soon?’ Gently teasing, Hannibal strokes the hair from Will’s forehead.

Will pushes into the touch. *I always want you*.

They drift for a while, exchanging soft touches and softer words, a needed reassurance after the storm of the past two days. All too soon, Randall knocks, informing them quietly that a bath has been drawn, and Will laughingly refuses Hannibal’s offer to carry him through to the washroom.

‘I admit that you were exceptional, but I do still have the use of my legs, thank you very much.’

‘Speaking of which.’ Hannibal strokes a hand down one stockinged calf, his lingering touch drawing goosebumps from Will’s flesh. ‘Allow me to help you with these.’

Will perches on the edge of the bed as Hannibal, kneeling before him, pulls loose the ribbons. He bestows a kiss on each knee as it is bared.

‘I should like to see you in stockings every night.’

Will arches a brow. ‘*Only* stockings?’

Lips trace a path downwards as the first stocking is peeled off. ‘Most assuredly. I shall send to London for a dozen more pairs. And ribbons in every shade.’

‘Such extravagance.’ Will bites his lip. ‘Did you really think that I was off seducing the help this afternoon?’

Hannibal looks up at him then, eyes darkened with remorse. ‘Of course not. I was angry and hurt after our quarrel. And I had missed you damnably. Forgive me?’

‘We are both of us possessed of sharp tongues.’ Reaching out, Will cups his lover’s face, thumb stroking the ridge of one high cheekbone. ‘And it has been a difficult time. Of course I forgive you. We shall say no more about it.’

***

But as he sits in the steaming tub, soaping away the day’s stresses within the cradle of Hannibal’s thighs, Will realises that there is one thing more he *must* say.

‘I know that I spoke yesterday of distracting Lord Wyvern, he begins, voice soft and serious, ‘but you must know that I would have taken no pleasure in it. And I would certainly not have allowed him to fuck me.’

Behind him, Hannibal stills. ‘You might see why I would think otherwise, given certain other choices you have made in the past.’

‘You mean, I suppose, Lord Sutcliffe,’ says Will stiffly, doing his best not to be offended but failing all the same.

‘Not to mention Lord Brauer. Now do not be missish with me,’ says Hannibal, settling gentle hands on Will’s shoulders. ‘It is just that now that I know you better, I must wonder why a person so intelligent and vivacious would bother with such utter dullards.’

Somewhat mollified, Will allows the soap to slip into the water and leans back into Hannibal’s body. ‘I had my reasons, as I have said.’

‘Hm. Reasons which you still do not care to share.’

At the slight note of reproach in Hannibal’s voice, Will turns his head and kisses one wet, muscled shoulder. ‘Not yet. But I shall say this - since coming here, I have wanted no other but you.’

‘Little flatterer.’ But Hannibal enfolds him in a fierce hug that belies the lightness of his reply.

‘If I were to promise not to allow Lord Wyvern to touch me,’ tentative, Will curls his hands around strong forearms, ‘would you reconsider my plan for tomorrow night?’

A sigh stirs the hair at his nape. ‘I believe this is what is called taking advantage.’

Will tips his head back, eyes beseeching. ‘Please. It will work, I know it.’

Hannibal’s gaze is troubled but there is resignation in his voice. ‘Very well then. But you are not to let him put a hand on you, do you hear? Else I shall have no choice but to call the damned fellow out then and there.’

***

The air between them cleared at last, dinner in the Oak Room passes most pleasantly. The Lords Price are evidently delighted with Derbyshire, and appear to be genuinely grieving their imminent return to London.

‘There is nothing else for it,’ declares Lord Brian over dessert, spooning sorbet into his mouth with a look of rapture. ‘We must simply acquire a property up here. Then we may make complete nuisances of ourselves and visit you every week.’

‘I fear that life in the country would soon pall without the benefit of the theatre and clubs and all of those societies that the pair of you love to attend,’ says Hannibal with indulgent amusement. ‘Better rather that you make this an annual pilgrimage and keep intact the novelty of our country ways.’

WIth a pang, Will wonders who will be sitting in *his* place come each of these annual dinners. One more in a succession of Lady Margot’s *gifts*, perhaps. But he swallows the unpleasant thought and smiles along with the others.

Only when the table has been cleared and the Madeira poured is the subject of Lord Wyvern introduced. The Lords Price sit quietly, their faces pictures of indignation, as Hannibal explains in brief but eloquent terms the accusation with which he is faced.

‘We had wondered, Lord James,’ says Will hesitantly, ‘whether your mother might be persuaded to come to our aid, given that she is on intimate terms with the last surviving witness.’

‘We shall be dining with Lady Mores immediately upon our return to Berkeley Square.’ Lord Brian turns to his husband. ‘Perhaps she might be induced to invite her very good friend Lady Frances Hyde to tea the following day.’

‘Upon which occasion, my mother may enquire as to the true facts of the case.’ Lord James nods. ‘And if Lady Frances should agree to confirm her account in writing, so much the better.’

‘She may not wish to cooperate. Objectionable or not, Wyvern is still her nephew,’ points out Lord Brian. ‘Or it may be that her memory fails her altogether. What then?’

Hannibal sets down his wine glass, expression grim. ‘Then let Wyvern publish and be damned.’

‘You cannot.’ Lord Brian stares at him in dismay. ‘What if he makes a bid for your title? Or even for Lecter House?’

‘He might try for the title, I suppose.’ Hannibal steeples his fingers contemplatively. ‘He is older than I by a little over a week. If his document stands up to scrutiny, my parents’ marriage will be declared invalid. What is to prevent him then from making a case for being recognised as my father’s legitimate heir?’

‘Damn it all, Lecter.’ Lord James looks positively distraught. ‘We cannot allow this to happen. Brian, what say you to a midnight dash for home? We can return to the inn and be packed within the hour. If we travel through the night, we might reach London by breakfast the day after tomorrow.’

‘The weather is clement and there is a good moon.’ Slapping his hand down on the table, Lord Brian grins. ‘I say let us go at once. Lecter, would you lend us one of your grooms, that we might have him ride ahead and arrange for changes of horses and such like along the way?’

‘My dear friends,’ says Hannibal, voice suspiciously uneven, ‘not for the world would I have you racing back to London on my account.’

‘A pity,’ retorts Lord James, reaching for the rope pull that will summon Chilton, ‘for that is exactly what we are going to do. And perhaps the extra day we gain will be enough to ensure that you shall be in receipt of a letter from Wyvern’s aunt by the end of the week. Now, about that groom.’

The next half hour is a blur of strategizing and emotional farewells. On the circular driveway, while Hannibal issues instructions to the groom, Will finds himself drawn aside by a grave Lord James.

‘Look after him, would you? He puts a brave face on things but I know that this business must be cutting him to the quick. He adored the late count, you know.’

Will looks over at Hannibal, so tall and handsome, noble brow furrowed as he walks, deep in discussion with the servant, and aches to go to him - to put his arms around him and tell him fiercely that all will be well. That he will defend him against the devil himself if necessary.

‘I shall do my best,’ he says huskily. ‘Whatever it is in my power to do for him I shall, I promise.’

Lord James’ smile is warmly approving. ‘Thank you for that. Knowing how much you care for him makes it that much easier for us to leave.’

Stricken, Will meets Lord James’ compassionate, knowing gaze. ‘I am beginning to think that I might care for him rather too much - certainly more than he cares for me.’

‘Rot,’ replies Lord James gently. ‘On both counts. But I shall say no more - the rest is for the two of you to discover for yourselves. My hope is that once this tiresome business with Wyvern is over, you will do so. And it will be quite wonderful.’ He winks. ‘I look forward to hearing all about it when next we meet.’

In another few minutes, the carriage is declared ready to depart, and Will moves to take his place at Hannibal’s side as they watch it trundle off down the driveway. If Hannibal wonders about Will’s pink cheeks, he does not enquire, merely slipping an arm around him and murmuring against his temple, ‘A night-cap or straight to bed?’

‘Bed,’ whispers Will, seeking with his eyes to convey that which he cannot say in the presence of Chilton, who hovers in the doorway behind them. ‘Please.’

Hannibal’s hand tightens on his waist before he is released, and Will follows him, content to lag behind as orders are given for the house to be shut up for the night. Yet even as his skin tightens in anticipation of the pleasures to come, he cannot help but wonder with a shiver what it will be like the day *he* is bundled off in a carriage, contract fulfilled. And he finds himself wishing that Lord James had not been so kind, for being presented with the mere *possibility* of real feeling on Hannibal’s part has made him realise how desperately - and dangerously - he covets it.

Designs

It is with barely-checked impatience that Hannibal dismisses Randall, whose seeming determination to draw out the process of folding and putting away every item of clothing is, he suspects, linked to the valet's indignation over the state of Will's bed after their earlier tryst. When at last the door closes behind him, Hannibal turns his heated gaze on the boy now lounging on his bed.

'Less smirking, if you please.'

'Oh, hush.' A slender hand is extended to him. 'Come over here and put your hands on me.'

Willingly he goes, and with eager fingers pushes up the nightshirt that hides far too much of his lover's exquisite body, groaning at the sight of a hard cock and erect nipples. 'Look at you. Just aching for my mouth, hm?'

Will laughs, arching, skin dewy and rose-pink. 'As you are aching to taste me. Do not deny it.'

'I have no wish to deny it,' breathes Hannibal. He bends and takes a nipple into his mouth, sucking greedily, teasing with his tongue until Will is pulling at him. He chuckles and moves to the other nipple, suckling hard. 'You taste like berries,' he murmurs against the wet nub.

'So fanciful,' scoffs Will, but his eyes are black with want, and his legs fall open as he squirms against the mattress. 'Suck my cock and tell me how *that* tastes.'

'All in good time.' Grinning wickedly, Hannibal pauses to strip off his own nightshirt before returning his attentions to those beautifully sensitive nipples, licking one as he gently palms the other. Stimulating both until they are peaked pink and glistening.

And Will, head thrown back, black curls in disarray, pants, 'Please, Hannibal. I need your mouth. Suck me.'

What pleasure Hannibal takes then, kissing his way down the lithe, pale body to wrap his lips around Will's length, salty-slick on his tongue. Will cries out, hips jerking upwards. Hannibal holds him still, hands cupping that pert little bottom, and sucks harder, merciless in his need to have Will come undone beneath him. Soon the boy is jerking in wave after wave of orgasmic pleasure, and when at last he is languid and pliant, Hannibal draws off him, only to seek with oil and fingers to work him to hardness again.

'Inside,' moans Will, tugging him up to lie within spread thighs, and guiding Hannibal's cock to his entrance. 'And do not stop until you have filled me with your spend.'

'*Gods*, Will.'

He pushes in and gasps at the perfect clenching of inner muscles. He grips Will's hips, angling him, to sink deeper still. Lost in the tight clutch of his young lover's supple body, Hannibal rocks into him in a series of ever more urgent thrusts. The hard jut of Will's erection leaks against his belly, and Hannibal wraps a hand around it.

'Poor darling,' he teases. 'Shall I rub it better?'

Will cries out, arching up in that perfect bow that Hannibal loves to see and run worshipful hands over. He does so now, hoisting his boy ever closer, urging him to wrap slim legs around his waist. He palms Will's rigid cock again, merciless in his intent.

'Come for me,' he growls. 'Let me feel you.'

And as Will stiffens and spills in his hand, his little stuttering cries push Hannibal over the edge, and he buries himself deep, emptying with harsh pants against fragranced skin.

***

Hannibal wakes to find the space beside him empty. He pushes himself up on his elbows, frowning, recalling how he had ended the previous night wrapped around his lover. How Will had pushed closer into his embrace, sighing sleepy contentment. How the two of them had fallen asleep in each other's arms. How his last cogent thought had been a fancy to awaken his boy by sliding inside him again...

‘Will?’

‘Mr Graham has been up this past hour, my lord.’ In bustles Randall, cheerful gaze sweeping over his master. ‘He said not to disturb you, but to let you know that he would be in the garden if you needed him before breakfast.’

So much for Hannibal’s plan of an early morning seduction.

‘What is the time, Randall?’

‘A quarter past six, my lord.’

And Will is already dressed and out. This is not a good sign. Most mornings, Hannibal has been hard-pressed to drag the boy to wakefulness by seven. *Wyvern*. It is, of course, his doing. The prospect of the odious man’s visit weighs heavy on Hannibal’s heart; so, too, it must be affecting Will. Rage swells in Hannibal’s chest at the thought of the ordeal that his boy is planning to put himself through in the hours to come. Throwing back the covers, he beckons to his valet.

‘Help me to dress, Randall. I wish to be downstairs in ten minutes.’

***

It takes a little over twenty - there is the matter of a shave to attend to, at Randall’s insistence - but soon enough, Hannibal is seated at his office desk, pen flying over paper, mouth set in a grim line which only eases once he has delivered the hastily-written letter into Chilton’s hands. Task accomplished, he ventures finally outside, taking great lungfuls of fresh air before striding across the lawn in search of Will. He spies Mr Stammets in conversation with an under gardener, and changes course to join them by the newly-planted rose garden.

‘Good morning, Stammets. How went your dinner with Mr Budge last night?’

‘Very well, thank you, my lord.’ Stammets grins, a flash of white in a sun-browned face. ‘Although he may have rather a sore head this morning.’

‘Now, Stammets.’ Hannibal looks at him reprovingly. ‘You have not been plying him with your honey wine, I hope.’

Stammets’ look of evasive guilt is answer enough. But Hannibal is anxious to resume his search. Lectures on the subject of inebriating unsuspecting guests can wait.

‘Have you seen Mr Graham about?’ he asks, scanning the empty slopes. ‘I had thought to join him on his morning walk.’

‘Aye, my lord. He came by us only a few minutes since. I believe you will find him in the walled conservatory. He was interested in seeing the pineapples.’

Hannibal follows Stammets’ nod through a circle of trees towards an elegant glasshouse that abuts a long wall of sandstone. Completed in his first year as count, this structure of white-painted wood housing long, thin rectangular windows and a central porticoed entrance, separates the garden at its northernmost end from the pathway that leads up to the stableyard.

After bidding his head gardener a good morning - and making a mental note to ensure that poor Mr Budge is given a good breakfast - Hannibal heads towards the glasshouse, climbing its flight of stone

steps and entering through a double set of doors. Despite the coolness of the newly-risen sun, the air inside is already close; in another few hours, it will be intolerable.

He spots Will three units up, crouching as he studies the greenery intently, and heads towards him with a smile.

‘What are you about, having me chase all over the estate to find you?’

Will’s head turns, and his eyes are soft with welcome. ‘I did tell Randall where I was going,’ he points out mildly, rising to brush off his hands. ‘I had not meant to disappear, but when Mr Stammets told me that the first crop of pineapples was almost ready, I wanted to see them.’

‘And what do you think of our little experiment?’ Hannibal surveys with pride the wide bed which jostles with squat trees, their long, sharp-edged leaves waving around like so many tentacles. Each is topped by a large, knobbly fruit, colours ranging from garish orange to the deep green that indicates full ripeness.

‘I think it very fine.’ Will steps into Hannibal’s space, face tilted up, and for a breathless moment Hannibal thinks that he is to be kissed. But Will’s lips only brush his cheek before he steps away again, a slight pinkness to his complexion that is most becoming. ‘You and your Mr Stammets will accomplish great things here.’

Hannibal snares him about the waist. ‘I would have you know I had designs on you this morning,’ he says, conveying reproach in both expression and tone. ‘I had devised all manner of delightful ways to wake you.’

‘That I am sorry indeed to have missed,’ sighs Will, hands coming up to thread through Hannibal’s hair, smoothing it back from his temples in a way that has him closing his eyes to better enjoy the sensations chasing through him. ‘Perhaps tomorrow, after -’

His halting voice recalls Hannibal to the unpleasantness that awaits them, and to his earlier misgivings. He reaches up and gently disengages Will’s hold, bringing both hands to his lips and kissing each one before relinquishing them.

‘As to that, I have decided that this plan of yours cannot go ahead.’

‘What?’ Will stares at him, dismay evident in the downturn of his mouth. ‘It has to. How else are we to secure the original licence?’

‘We shall have to make do with the copy.’ Hannibal raises a hand to quell further objection. ‘My mind is made up, Will. Fantasies of espionage are all very well, but in practice there is too much that could go wrong.’

‘Indeed.’ It is a snap of sound.

Braced for further beratement, Hannibal is surprised when, instead, Will turns his attention back to the pineapple bed.

‘How long will it be, do you think, until they are ready?’

‘Possibly another month. No longer.’

‘Well, then.’ With a shrug. ‘Shall we go in for breakfast?’

This apparent docility is new - and suspicious. Still, Hannibal reasons, there is for the moment little that Will can actually do to thwart him save sulk inwardly. As for later, it is entirely possible that the boy might try for a last-minute rebellion. WIth luck, however, the steps Hannibal has already taken will ensure the failure of any such scheme…

He offers his arm, and is pleased when Will accepts it without demur. Thus they stroll together back to the house, and the next hour is spent enjoying a fine breakfast, conversing on all manner of trivial topics, and studiously avoiding the one which must necessarily be in the forefront of both their minds.

When this week is done, thinks Hannibal darkly, no matter the outcome, he shall take Will away somewhere - to spend a month at one of his smaller estates, perhaps. Or even just retreat to the hunting tower. Anywhere that it can be just the two of them, where he can glut himself on pleasure and on Will - and forget, even temporarily, the insidious forces that threaten from without.

***

After breakfast, they meet with Mr Budge in the library. The poor fellow still looks somewhat green, and Hannibal rings for tea and biscuits in the hope that it will be enough to settle their guest's stomach.

The previous evening he had furnished Budge with the copied licence, and once the tea is drunk and sweet biscuits consumed, Budge produces it, spreading it out atop the library's sturdy mahogany desk. From a hinged portmanteau of cracked brown leather, he extracts also a small glass magnifier, and gestures for Hannibal and Will to observe.

'You were correct to be suspicious, my lord.' He points to the handwritten date. 'See how the first three letters are cramped at the beginning of the line, yet there is ample space at the end? And then there is the double *e*, which is written uncommonly close.'

Hannibal frowns. 'You think that this originally read *tenth* rather than *fifteenth*?'

'I would say you have a very good case for arguing such, even with only an inferior copy of the document to hand. And that would, of course, support your family's understanding of these unfortunate events.' Budge bends to examine the paper again. 'It is not merely the unevenness of this particular word that is suspect, nor its untidy presentation on the line: the uniformity of the rest of the handwriting is a classic sign of tampering elsewhere. And there are certain traits present in individual letters - in particular the vowels - that do not quite match those elsewhere in the document. Of course, if I were able to examine the original document, I could attest to all of this with certainty.'

'Unfortunately, it is unlikely that such an outcome can be managed.'

'Unlikely but not impossible.' The tilt of Will's chin indicates defiance.

With a quelling glare for his stubborn lover, Hannibal continues. 'You should proceed with this as your only evidence, Mr Budge.'

'I see. Would it at least be possible to obtain a sample of the supposed forger's own handwriting?'

'On the premise that Lord Wyvern himself committed this act?'

'Exactly so.' Mr Budge's eyes are sombre. 'It is more likely than you might think. Forgery is a capital offence, one that few would risk unless they had much to gain from the outcome.'

Hannibal’s thoughts fly at once to the collection of acceptances for the Midsummer’s Eve party that are currently stuffed in a drawer in the estate office. ‘I should be able to provide at least a few lines and a signature.’

‘Anything would help,’ nods Budge.

‘Then I shall have my butler show you through to the estate office. He can also furnish you with Lord Wyvern’s card.’

As Budge packs up his bag, Hannibal rings for Chilton.

Will is pacing in the background, preoccupied and tense, and suddenly Hannibal knows as surely as if the boy had confessed it that he *will* defy Hannibal’s orders and proceed with his plan to draw Wyvern away and tempt him to carelessness. Upon Chilton’s appearance, therefore, Hannibal hastens to intercept him.

'Well? Is it done?'

Chilton's eyes flick briefly to Will before the butler nods. 'All is in order, my lord.'

‘Very good, Chilton.' Relief lightens Hannibal's tone. 'Now, about Mr Budge.’

Finally, instructions conveyed and leave taken, the doors close behind butler and guest, and Hannibal turns his full attention on the boy who is now flipping absently through some large tome or other, bottom lip drawn between his teeth.

‘Come, sit with me awhile.’

Will abandons his book readily enough to join Hannibal on the sofa, but he is rigid in his posture, feet planted wide apart, hands clasped tightly between his knees.

‘How is it that this day is interminable already?’

Hannibal runs a soothing hand up Will’s back, fingers tangling in the curls that spill over his high collar. ‘It will be over soon enough. Budge is to take luncheon with Crawford, and he will keep him company for the remainder of the day. So until tonight, it is just you and I. How would you like to spend the time, hm?’

Unexpected but welcome is the sudden turn, the sliding of arms around his waist, and the burrowing of a dark head against his chest. ‘Just - together, like this. May we stay here awhile?’

‘Of course, if you wish it.’

Hannibal reclines his head with a sigh, arms tight around the boy in his arms, and closes his eyes. For a few moments, he thinks. But the continued stresses of this long week are catching up with him at last, and gradually his hold on Will loosens. His lids grow heavy, muscles relaxing, as the rhythmic ticking of the clock on the mantelpiece lulls him to slumber.

***

He is roused by a light tickling sensation. Wrinkling his nose, Hannibal swats blindly at whatever irritating object is brushing insistently against his lips.

A familiar giggle precedes the return of the object to torment him again.

‘What the deuce -’ Grumbling, Hannibal opens his eyes, blinking in disorientation until Will’s grinning face comes into focus. The boy’s head is pillowed in Hannibal’s lap and he holds aloft a quill pen, which Hannibal eyes with reluctant amusement. ‘I am glad that you found a way to entertain yourself while I napped.’

‘I napped for a while as well. You make an excellent pillow,’ declares Will, rubbing his cheek against Hannibal’s thigh in a way that threatens to stir him to more than wakefulness.

‘Alright, rude boy, that will do.’ Amused, he sets a palm to Will’s cheek. ‘I see you are determined to provoke me into improper acts on this sofa.’

‘It would hardly be the first time,’ comes the sly response.

‘Well, not today,’ he chides gently. ‘I suggest instead a long ride as a cure for such restlessness.’

Will groans but wriggles up obediently into a sitting position. ‘Very well, but it had better be after luncheon.’

It is with surprise and some disconcertment that Hannibal notices then that the hour of two is almost upon them.

‘Come.’ Gently, he tugs Will up from the sofa. ‘We had better have something light now, else Wyvern will be dining alone. And until we have completed this business, we must have his cooperation.’

With a scowl, Will presses against him, hands curling into his coat. ‘I would that after this week we never have to see his unpleasant face again,’ he says vehemently.

Hannibal sighs and closes his arms around his boy. ‘I, too, darling,’ he murmurs into fragrant curls. ‘I, too.’

***

‘Good gods, man! I declare this stuff would serve to strip the paint from my carriage!’

As Wyvern turns florid, Hannibal sips sparingly from his own glass, and muses that perhaps this evening need not be the trial that he had anticipated.

A simple luncheon and a horseback ride across the estate had been insufficient activity to drive off the mounting tension as the afternoon had crawled on. Perhaps their time would have been better spent in bed, but the mere idea of having Wyvern’s spectre hovering over them as they made love had been enough for Hannibal to dismiss the idea out of hand. And Will had seemed equally circumspect, his usual vivacity dimmed as they had returned to the house to bathe and change.

Wyvern had arrived promptly at six o’clock, an indication perhaps of his own state of apprehension. Another had been his willingness to seize on the offered glass of sherry as they had assembled in the library to look upon the much-discussed special wedding licence.

‘There.’ Unfolding it, he had slapped it down upon the desk, triumph glittering in eyes of pale blue. ‘Now do you see? Who would doubt the authenticity of such a document?’

‘Oh, I have no doubt of its authenticity,’ Hannibal had said - in all sincerity, as the document itself was unquestionably genuine.

He had seen at once, however, why Budge was so anxious to lay his hands on it. Its colours were vivid, the textures rich - and certain details, now that Hannibal knew what to look for, stood out in far greater detail than in its insipid and smudged copy.

‘Then perhaps we might come to an arrangement tonight,’ had been Wyvern’s smug suggestion, ‘and avoid unnecessary delay.’

‘Perhaps. I shall think on it over dinner.’

Wyvern sniffs now at his glass, then holds it aloft and peers suspiciously into the amber depths of the liquid within. ‘What is it?’

‘Honey wine,’ says Will airily, sampling his own with every appearance of relish, ‘brewed by Mr Stammets, the head gardener. Have you never tasted mead before, my lord?’

Despite the gravity of the situation, Hannibal has to hide a smile. For it is undoubtedly the most potent brew that he has ever had the misfortune of drinking, and never under normal circumstances would he have it served it at table. Already, he has taken care to warn Will against imbibing too much.

Wyvern mutters something about ‘the devil’s brew’, yet as the first course gives way to the second, and the second to the third, his glass is more than once on the brink of being emptied. The servants have clearly been instructed well by Chilton, for they move swiftly each time to replenish it; and by the time dessert is set before them, Wyvern’s movements are sluggish, his words slurred.

With a mouth full of cake, Wyvern gestures expansively at the grand surroundings of the private dining room. ‘I am sure that you would be loathe to lose all of this, Lecter. Particularly since you have made so many changes out of your own pocket, a new ballroom being your latest fancy, so Mr Graham has told me. That being the case, have you yet seen sense? Shall you agree to my proposal or not? Fifty thousand pounds to buy my silence does seem a trifling amount in the circumstances.’

‘Fifty *thousand*?’

At Will’s shocked gasp, Hannibal reaches beneath the table to squeeze his thigh in warning and reassurance both. Seated at the head, with Wyvern on his right and Will on his left, Hannibal feels in this moment all the wisdom of acting as a barrier between his lover and his unwanted guest.

‘How is it, Lord Wyvern,’ asks Will with steely politeness, ‘that you do not simply take your claim to the courts? If indeed you are the legitimate firstborn of the late count, then that would make you the heir to all of his estates, would not it?’

‘You are correct.’ Wyvern’s smirk is fulsome. ‘And I fully believe myself to be just that. It is well known hereabouts that the late count and my mother conducted an affair before they were so cruelly separated. Yet although the circumstances appear to be in my favour - the licence proving beyond all doubt that when the count and my mother were wed, she had indeed achieved her majority, with no need of parental approval for the match - still, the fact remains that my poor mother was, shortly afterwards, forced into a bigamous union with Lord Wyvern.’

‘Ah. I see your dilemma,’ says Will, with all the appearance of wide-eyed innocence, ‘for that being the case, it would be impossible to verify who had fathered you, my lord.’

‘To verify with certainty,’ snaps Wyvern. ‘The courts could decide to rule on the basis of probability.’

‘True.’ Head tilted in consideration, Will muses, ‘Yet to achieve that outcome could take years. And in the meantime, the money that such an enterprise would entail -’

Wyvern chimes in with churlish haste, ‘Hence my more than generous offer to settle this matter privately. His lordship,’ he sneers, ‘keeps his title and his family’s reputation intact, while I receive some little recompense for the great wrong that has been done to me.’

Will plucks up the bottle of honey wine and proffers it to Wyvern, who nods stiffly. What remains is barely enough to fill even half of his glass, however, and he inspects it with a look of dismay.

‘Is there no more?’

‘One moment.’ Hannibal rings for Chilton, who appears within moments. ‘Have we another bottle of Mr Stammets’ excellent mead, Chilton?’

Chilton looks at him askance for a moment before reassembling his features into their usual arrangement of solemnity. ‘I shall have to check in the cellar, my lord.’

‘Lord Wyvern,’ says Will softly, ‘what would you say to a request for the licence to be examined by an expert in the field of law, that it might be verified as genuine?’

Wyvern bristles. ‘I would say that a gentleman’s word is his bond and should not be questioned. In addition,’ he smiles thinly, ‘I would suggest that such a move would risk attracting unwanted publicity for *both* parties.’

‘You seem to have thought of everything.’ Will leans across the table, chin resting on his propped hand, the very picture of admiration. ‘How clever of you.’

‘Well, I -’ Visibly taken aback, Wyvern appears to war between suspicion and pride. Pride wins out. ‘I do think it important to take account of all eventualities.’

‘Oh, absolutely. And it cannot be denied that you have been most… thorough. Well then.’ Setting down his cake fork, Will smiles at him winsomely. ‘You spoke before of the new ballroom, Lord Wyvern. Would you care to see it?’

Hannibal looks on in exasperation as Will all but flutters his eyelashes at the earl.

‘To *that* proposal I would most enthusiastically agree.’ Wyvern too leans across the table, voice lowering in what is presumably intended to be an onslaught of charm. ‘Particularly if *you*, Mr Graham, would do me the honour of escorting me.’

Oh, Will had read him well. Hannibal recalls the dinner at Boarham Hall, and Wyvern’s attempted monopolising of his lover. Come to think of it, when afterwards he had followed them outside, perhaps he had been hoping to find Will alone. Suppressing a snarl, Hannibal is more thankful than ever of the plan which he has put in place - and entirely furious with Will for being so willing to throw himself to the wolves.

A quiet throat-clearing draws the party’s attention to Chilton’s re-entrance. ‘Begging your pardon, my lord,’ he says apologetically, as he comes forward with a bottle of the promised wine and proceeds to replenish Wyvern’s glass, ‘but there is a visitor for Mr Graham.’

‘For me?’ Will looks up in confusion.

‘Yes, sir. I have put him in the Oak Room.’

‘Well, who is it?’

Chilton’s tone is apologetic. ‘I regret that the gentleman declined to give his name, Mr Graham. He was, however, most insistent upon seeing you without delay.’

‘I call that confoundedly odd!’ exclaims Wyvern. ‘Damn the fellow’s eyes. Who is he to disturb a private party and not have the decency to announce himself?’

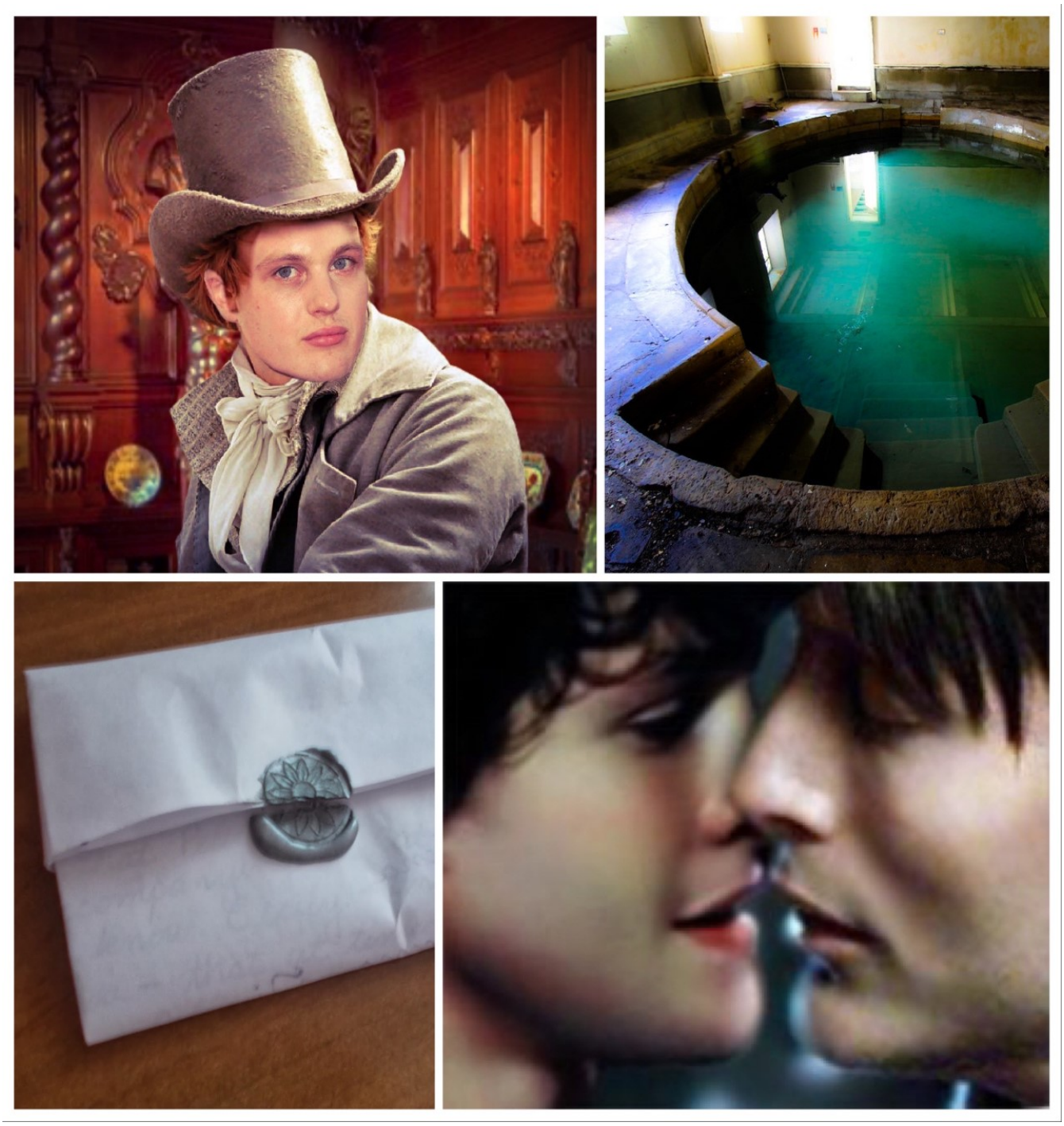
‘Very well, Chilton,’ interjects Hannibal. ‘Accompany Mr Graham to the Oak Room and see to his visitor’s comfort. Perhaps,’ addressing Will curtly, ‘you might persuade your mystery guest to shed his shyness and join us by and by.’

‘I - yes, perhaps.’

Will appears distracted, almost troubled, as he pushes back his chair. His gaze is strangely evasive as he takes a hasty leave, and Hannibal watches him go with narrowed eyes before turning back to Wyvern with a courteous smile.

‘Now, my lord. About that tour.’

Earned



It takes every ounce of Will's patience not to shoulder his way past Chilton, who seems determined to move at as sedate a pace as Will has ever known the butler to employ. Every slow step is agony - his mind, in contrast, races with all manner of awful possibilities. Could it be that his past has caught up with him at last? Is Anthony waiting even now to confront him? Or even Benjamin Grantham, Lord Wolfram, himself? This thought alone is enough to provoke a swell of nausea, and he stops for a moment to take a deep, steadying breath.

‘Mr Graham, are you unwell?’ Chilton’s eyes, these days ever full of kindness - a wonder to Will after what had been a distinctly unpromising beginning between them - light on him now with concern. ‘Is it the mead? I did advise His Lordship against it.’

‘No, no.’ Will dredges up a smile of reassurance. ‘I am quite well, Chilton. It is only that I am anxious to know who could be calling on me here.’

The oddest expression crosses Chilton’s face. If Will did not know better, he might almost name it as guiltiness. ‘I understand, sir. Please do not be concerned on that account.’

‘Chilton? Do you know who it is?’

‘Sir, I -’

They are crossing the Painted Hall now, and Will’s patience finally gives way. Striding past the butler, he heads towards the passageway that will take him through a series of anterooms to the Oak Room and…

‘Lord Verger!’

Will draws to an abrupt halt in the doorway, mingled relief and confusion rendering him momentarily speechless.

‘Mr Graham, at last.’

Mason Verger, in greatcoat and hat, hastens from the window.

‘What are you doing here? Is anything wrong?’

‘Not at all, dear boy,’ soothes Mason. ‘I am here upon request to deliver a message.’

In the next moment, Will finds pressed into his hands a familiar sheet of paper. Looking down at it, his confusion only increases.

‘This is -’

‘A copy of a rather sensitive document. Yes, I know. Lecter informed me in his letter.’

What letter? Will wants to yell. Instead, he swallows his frustration to ask, ‘But how do you come to have it in your possession?’

‘A Mr Budge brought it by not half an hour since,’ Mason informs him. ‘He said to tell you to make sure to leave it folded in the same way as the original, so as to avert suspicion. At least for as long as it takes to ensure that the original can be secured.’

And suddenly it all makes sense.

‘Hannibal,’ breathes Will, forgetting himself quite as the whole of his lover’s devious plan unfolds in his mind. ‘He means to take my place - to do what he *forbade* me from attempting. The *audacity*.’ His gaze sharpens on Mason, who is regarding him now with some trepidation. ‘But why involve you? Why not simply have Mr Budge deliver the copy to me?’

‘Possibly because he knew that this Mr Budge would not feel it within his province to tell you what I must - that you should not attempt to stop this. Allow Lecter to act as he sees fit,’ says Mason with

uncharacteristic seriousness.

Will's throat tightens. 'Lord Verger, you said that Count Lecter wrote to you. Do you happen to have his letter about you?'

'As it happens, I do.'

'Then would you have the goodness to show it to me? I would not ask,' he adds, at Mason's hesitation, 'if it were not important. But I, too, need to decide how best to act, and knowing something of his thoughts might help.'

After another moment, Mason reaches into his pocket and withdraws an unsealed envelope. He passes it over, and Will receives it from him with a look of gratitude before unfolding it with no little haste.

Verger

I am in immediate need of your aid. If you are able, come to Lecter House tonight, no later than seven. A man named Budge will furnish you with a copy of a document which, if authentic, could be the ruin of me. The possessor of the original, Lord Wyvern, brings it tonight. He is attempting blackmail (the details of which I promise to avail you of in due course), and I have persuaded him to allow me to look upon the true document. Mr Graham wishes to attempt a switch, that the original might be examined for signs of fraud. But to do so risks compromising his safety, and I find that I cannot countenance the idea of him putting himself in harm's way - for he thinks to act as a distraction for the scoundrel while the switch is made. I have decided, therefore, to play his *part in this scheme. Tell him that he must take on my role and swap the documents while I keep Wyvern occupied. He may fuss and refuse, and I need you to advocate for me and convince my stubborn boy to do as he is told and trust my judgement. I am in your debt for this, Verger.*

Lecter

My stubborn boy. Tears prick Will's eyes as he refolds the letter and hands it back to Mason, who regards him with compassion.

'He is awfully fond of you. You must know that.'

'I am awfully fond of him,' sniffs Will dolefully. 'Even when he is being a complete ass.'

'He wants to protect you.' Mason's tone has grown wistful. 'It is a rarity, to be put so before all others.'

'Forgive me if I speak out of turn, but from what I have witnessed of Lord Huntingdon's attentiveness, he would put you first without hesitation.'

Mason sighs. 'That may once have been the case, but I fear that I have pushed him away one too many times. At any rate,' setting a hand to Will's shoulder, 'now is not the time for such a discussion. We have a task to perform, do not we?'

'We?'

'Certainly.' And Mason flashes him a grin. 'For it seems to me that you will be in need of a lookout.'

***

The dining room is empty when Will peers around the door. Predictable or not, it is enough to make his stomach lurch.

'Come,' he urges Mason, 'they may by now be in the plunge bath, but we should check the ballroom first. If we are discovered, this will all have been for nothing.'

Moving quickly and silently, they move through the dining room and Sculpture Gallery and on into the orangery. At its far end, Will leads the way up a narrow spiral staircase to a small antechamber which leads directly into the new ballroom.

Within this gilded space all is still, a ghostly spectacle of white cloths draped over tables and chairs, while in the centre of the newly-laid mahogany floor an enormous chandelier lies on its side, its thick chain of steel not yet affixed to the ceiling.

It is only upon their descent that the sounds drift up, laughter followed by splashing. With a sinking heart, Will indicates for Mason to follow his lead as he stops at the bottom of the staircase and removes his boots. On stockinged feet, they pass along the corridor that splits off from the orangery, towards a door that sits ajar. The heat from the plunge bath soaks into Will's skin the moment he steps inside, and he pulls free his cravat, careful to press against the tiled wall, edging along it until, at its corner, he peers around and sees, at last, what they have been seeking.

A pile of clothes, laid upon the changing bench in seemingly haphazard fashion. Will stares at it, his head full of wild imaginings of Lord Wyvern's bony fingers plucking at Hannibal's coat, his shirt, his skin… Mason, behind him, also glances around the corner, and his nudge draws Will's attention to the fact that draped atop the pile is Lord Wyvern's coat. Not so haphazard, then.

But this small comfort dwindles to nothing when Will looks beyond the bench and down into the deep pool of green marble that is, in design, reminiscent of those famous baths in the South-West of the country. Past the pool steps, his gaze tracks across to two figures, both naked, standing waist-high in the water. The nearest, quaffing a glass of wine filled brimful - presumably from the pitcher that balances precariously on the edge of the bath - murmurs something that seems to warrant an immediate bark of laughter. His dark head is turned away, but it is unmistakably Lord Wyvern. Shuddering, Will looks past him to Hannibal, who has positioned himself at the furthest end of the pool, arms stretched along the edge in an attitude of casual indolence. Their eyes meet, and suddenly all that Will can do is glare ferociously as a wave of choking jealousy threatens to overwhelm him.

He knows that this is simply part of a plan; knows that, had he been allowed to proceed with his own, *he* would be the one now frowning, eyes darting to the bench and back again. And worse, perhaps he would, despite his previous brave words to the contrary, have after all fallen prey to Lord Wyvern's advances.

He knows all of this. But still he is frozen to the spot as his mind screams in protest against the intimacy of the scene.

It takes Mason to yank him out of his daze, shoving the paper copy into his hand and manoeuvring him over to the bench. Will grabs Lord Wyvern's coat and fumbles at each pocket, finding the licence at his third attempt. He unfolds it, mindful suddenly of Mr Budge's advice, and places the copy beside it. The folds match almost precisely, certainly well enough to avoid arousing immediate suspicion, and in a matter of moments he has made the switch. Clutching the original, he stands with eyes averted, unable to look again at his lover, naked in such awful proximity with another man; and only at Mason's silent urging does he finally move, slipping from the fogged room into the blessed coolness of the corridor without.

‘Come, Lecter, drink up. Or is it your design to keep me here all night, eh?’

The sound of Lord Wyvern’s oily laughter seems to mock him all the way back.

***

In the grey hour before dawn, Will wakes in his own bed; and as memory returns, so his heart beats dully with every remembered moment: handing the licence over to Chilton, with a halting instruction to deliver it safely into His Lordship’s keeping; enduring Mason’s sympathetic farewell; trudging up to his bedchamber with the merest pause before Hannibal’s door; crying stupid tears into his pillow until, exhausted, sleep had taken him…

Now he turns over onto his back and blinks up at the ceiling, where spiderweb shadows stretch and wane. He darts a look at the connecting door; it is a fraction ajar, which was definitely not the case when he had crawled into bed. From here, he cannot tell whether Hannibal’s bed is occupied, and for several minutes he argues with himself over whether to move or stay stubbornly put.

Something - a sigh, the rustling of a sheet - draws his attention away from his own self-pity and back to the dim gloom of the other chamber. And a thought, unwelcome yet persistent. What of Hannibal’s suffering? What of the pawing - possibly worse - that he may have endured in order to spare Will? Was Hannibal to be punished for an act of gallantry that no one else would have performed? To protect the honour of a boy who had thought he had none left to lose...

Tears rise, but this time they are not for himself. Will swings his legs from the bed and pads on bare feet towards the door. At the threshold he hesitates, undecided.

‘Will?’

‘Yes?’ He hates how small he sounds. But he *feels* small.

‘Shall you come in?’

No coldness, as he had feared, but rather a thread of sympathy colours Hannibal’s voice. It bolsters his courage and he pushes open the door, stepping inside. Hannibal lies on his side, head propped up on one elbow. His eyes are unreadable in the semi-darkness.

‘Have you slept? I looked in on you when I came up but you were turned the other way.’

Deliberately.

Cheeks flooding with guilty colour, Will mutters, ‘I slept. Some. When did you come up?’

‘Not long after you.’ This gentleness is far worse a reproach than any chiding could have been. ‘After - our guest - had gone, I felt the need for a swim.’

‘In the river? At night?’ Exasperation and concern propel Will forward. ‘Hannibal, for the love of the gods, you could have been seized by a cramp and drowned! What were you thinking?’

A brow is raised, the response haughty. ‘That I would not sully this bed with any trace of what has been an extremely unpleasant evening.’

‘You do not mean -’ Will’s hand flies to his mouth, nausea rising. ‘Did he -’

‘No! Gods, no.’ Hannibal sits up and extends his hand. ‘Will, come here.’ When Will fails to move, he clicks his tongue. ‘Ever stubborn, hm? Very well, then.’

The next thing Will knows, Hannibal has slipped from the bed. He reaches Will in a few quick strides, scooping him up and returning to deposit him on the mattress. Indignant, Will scrambles away, but Hannibal does not touch him again, merely sitting beside him with a sigh.

‘No, Wyvern did not attempt to have his way with me. He was, however, horribly drunk - we saw to that, if you recall - and so there were a few moments that he shall no doubt recall with a red face when he wakes.’

‘He did not touch you?’ At the shake of Hannibal’s head, relief washes through Will and he sags against the bedpost. ‘When I saw you together like that -’

‘Which was the whole point, remember?’ Dryly, Hannibal comments, ‘When you looked at us with such fury, I thought for a moment that you might dive in and try to sink us both.’

Flushing anew, Will averts his gaze. ‘Do not mock me.’

‘Darling.’ A finger slips beneath his chin, turning his face upwards with gentle persistence. ‘I wish only for you to understand why I acted as I did tonight.’

‘I do understand.’ Will meets Hannibal’s gaze with a petulant shrug. ‘You did not want him to see *me* naked, to touch *me*.’

‘Of course I did not.’ A sliver of impatience colours Hannibal’s tone. ‘And I had thought that you would by now have realised why I took your place.’

‘Because you could not trust in my ability to evade his advances as you trusted in your own?’

The shake of Hannibal’s head is emphatic. ‘It was not about trust, ridiculous boy.’

‘Then *what*?’ Will hisses, body tensed, ready to bolt back to his own room and lock the door should the conversation continue on this vexing course.

‘Cannot you see? It is about the distinct possibility that Wyvern and I are related!’

‘Do not *bellow* at me!’

‘Do not give me cause!’

Even as he glowers, Will takes pause. ‘You mean - oh.’

‘Precisely.’ Hannibal rakes a hand through sleep-tousled hair. ‘The validity of the marriage aside, the fact remains that my father was, by all accounts, in love with Wyvern’s mother. And they did engage in a brief affair. Wyvern is older than me by a little over a week, therefore it is entirely feasible that he is my elder half-brother.’

‘You knew that you would be safe with him last night,’ says Will slowly.

‘So I had hoped. And certainly far safer than you would have been, for Wyvern has been lusting after you since first setting eyes on you.’ Hannibal grimaces. ‘As it turns out, allowing him unlimited access to Stammets’ honey wine was not the cleverest of moves. I think that he forgot for a while who *he* was, let alone who I might be. I had to evade his slippery grasp more than once.’

Will looks at his lover in stunned silence until, almost without volition, his lips twitch upwards and he breaks into peals of laughter.

‘Go on, make merry at my predicament, terrible boy.’ But Hannibal, already eyeing him with rueful amusement, is quickly grinning in return.

‘My apologies,’ giggles Will, crawling into Hannibal’s lap to sit astride him, nightshirt riding up his thighs in the process. ‘Truly, it is not at all a matter to be taken lightly.’

‘So I see.’ Hannibal’s arms tighten around his waist. ‘I am sorry that you were upset.’

Will sighs, sobering. ‘I am sorry that I did not wait up for you.’

‘You were sulking. You do so quite splendidly, little ladybird.’ Hannibal noses against his neck, kissing beneath his ear. ‘I would have come for you by and by.’

Will shivers and wriggles closer. ‘Next time, come for me straight away. I was lonely without you.’

‘Contrary creature. For all I knew, you would have hefted some handy projectile at me, had I tried.’

As Hannibal proceeds to mouth at his exposed collarbone, Will drops his head back. ‘Mm. Very possibly, although I am sure that I would have appreciated the gesture all the same.’ His fingers curl around Hannibal’s beard-shadowed jaw, the roughness sending tingles through him. ‘As I appreciate what you are doing right now.’

‘To please you, darling?’ A roguish grin is directed upwards. ‘It is my delight, always.’

The words sing through him, and Will makes a helpless sound, clinging closer. ‘As it is my wish to please you. Let me help you to forget about that odious man, at least for a little while.’

‘Gladly.’ Voice taking on a husky note, Hannibal commands, ‘Lift your arms, little ladybird.’

Smiling, Will does so, and as Hannibal leans forward to strip the nightshirt from his body, he plants a quick kiss on his lover’s cheek, murmuring, ‘You, too.’

Chuckling, Hannibal raises his own arms, and Will rises on his knees to tug his nightshirt up and off. How wonderful, then, to press together naked, sucking kisses into skin wherever they can reach. After a heated few minutes of this, Will pushes at Hannibal’s broad shoulders.

‘Lie back.’

It is difficult to concentrate with hands roaming greedily over his backside, but he strokes tender fingers through the copious scattering of dark hair that narrows to a v, and bends to kiss each dusky nipple. Trailing kisses lower, over ribs and stomach and jutting hip bones, he spreads Hannibal’s legs apart to nose at the base of his cock. But when he goes to take the tip into his mouth, he finds himself tugged back up into Hannibal’s arms.

‘Come here.’ Hannibal rolls him so that he lies pliant beneath his lover’s hard body. ‘I want to look at you awhile.’

Will reaches up to thread his fingers through gleaming chestnut hair. ‘I can smell the river on your skin,’ he says dreamily. ‘And pine.’ With his other hand, he traces fingertips across Hannibal’s fair brows, down the straight bridge of his nose, and over chiseled lips that are curved now in a smile. His

eyes linger, thumb brushing absently back and forth across the plushness of that lower lip. ‘Would I taste it too, I wonder?’

‘Will.’ It is a whisper full of longing, and slowly Hannibal eases forward until their foreheads touch. ‘Sweet boy. Do not tempt me so.’

‘Why not?’ Heart thumping, Will draws his nose softly against Hannibal’s. ‘Shall you deny me, then?’

Their mouths are so close that he feels Hannibal’s breath on his lips as his lover groans. ‘Deny you? Would that I had the power to do so. But are you sure, little ladybird? Have I earned it?’

‘I am sure,’ Will whispers, cupping the back of Hannibal’s head. ‘You have trusted me and confided in me. You have protected me, even though I have shown little enough gratitude. You have earned it, Hannibal.’

Hannibal’s throat works and briefly he closes his eyes. When he opens them again, they shimmer with some unnameable emotion. Yet still he hesitates.

‘Your first kiss should be something never forgotten. I would wish for it to be a perfect moment.’

‘Hannibal.’ It is a tremulous sigh. ‘I am alone with you, naked in your bed.’ Will lays his palm flat over the centre of Hannibal’s chest. ‘I can feel your heart beating for *me*.’ A single tear wells and spills down his cheek as his eyes lock with Hannibal’s. ‘This *is* a perfect moment.’

Strange to feel shy suddenly, as fingers curve beneath his jaw and tilt his face gently upwards. A tender gaze falls on his lips, which part in willing invitation. And as Hannibal moves to brush a kiss, butterfly soft, at the corner of Will’s mouth, his lids flutter closed. Hannibal’s mouth is soft and warm, exploring his own with light presses, caressing first the bow of his top lip and then the plumpness of the bottom. A graze of teeth catches Will’s breath, and at the first touch of Hannibal’s tongue tip to his own, he moans, opening to his coaxing exploration. Instinct guides him as he tastes Hannibal in turn, tongue stroking hesitantly, growing bolder as he feels the thickening of Hannibal’s cock against his thigh. Because *he* has done that with only a kiss.

Emboldened, Will licks at Hannibal’s bottom lip and suckles on it softly. With a low groan, Hannibal takes Will’s mouth in a long, slow kiss of such sensuousness, his toes curl. Eagerly, he accepts the plunge of Hannibal’s tongue, stroking his own against it in delighted experimentation. When Hannibal lifts his head to gaze at him, eyes darkened to maroon, Will twists his fingers in his lover’s hair and urges him down again. Their lips meet and cling, parting only to allow for ragged breaths before they press together once more. Will’s thighs fall open to take Hannibal between them, hard and sticky with arousal. And still he laps at that beautiful mouth, glutting himself on new sensations, lost to all but the pressure of lips moving together and the frantic thrust of tongues.

Hannibal slides a hand beneath Will’s knee, urging it up, bringing together their cocks in delicious friction. With little moans and sighs, Will arches into him, trailing his hands down to cup and squeeze the perfect roundness of Hannibal’s bottom as Hannibal sucks kisses down his neck, across the curve of his shoulder, down his chest to tease and tongue his nipples. Body tightening, muscles drawing taut, Will sobs and writhes, and as his climax bursts upon him he cries out, shuddering beneath his lover’s hardness. Hannibal follows rapidly, groaning against his skin, slickness pulsing hot between them.

Will falls back onto the bed, lax with pleasure, as Hannibal collapses face down beside him. Hair boyishly mussed, he turns to nuzzle into Will’s cheek.

‘A perfect moment, hm?’

In reply, Will shifts so that their lips connect. It is a tender, lingering exchange.

‘It was,’ he says, smiling, and his heart flutters at the intensity of Hannibal’s gaze. 'It is.'

They lie together in contented silence for a time, Will listening to the first stirrings of birdsong outside, playing absently with the hand that is spread possessively across his stomach.

‘And you do not regret it? You are sure?’

‘Hush.’ He silences his lover’s worrying with another light kiss. ‘Had I known how very pleasant kissing was, I would have demanded it of you far sooner.’

‘I am sure that you would have,’ chuckles Hannibal, evidently satisfied by this reassurance, pulling Will more securely into his side. ‘You are, without a doubt, the most demanding brat I have ever encountered.’

For this, he receives an admonishing nip, and Will giggles as he is hauled in for a thorough tickling. Shrieking, he ends up with his face pressed to Hannibal’s belly, and naughtily he closes his lips around the cockhead that he was earlier denied.

‘Will, what are you doing?’ groans Hannibal, pushing at him in a very half-hearted manner.

Taking this for definite encouragement, Will begins to suck, only drawing off slowly as Hannibal fills in his mouth. ‘Why, cleaning you of course, my lord,’ he says with a wicked grin. ‘*Serving your needs*.’

‘If you wish to truly serve my needs,’ growls Hannibal, reaching below the bed for the rosewood box, ‘then you can begin by fucking me into proper wakefulness.’

Will bites his lip at the wholly arousing thought. He loves being filled by Hannibal, taken - oftentimes wonderfully roughly - against whatever surface is available. But he also relishes those times when Hannibal asks him for the same, to be claimed as *Will’s*, an equal in this as in every other pleasure that they share.

‘Yes, sir,’ he purrs, plucking the oil from Hannibal’s hand and setting it beside him on the bed. For he has a notion to do something new - at least between them - and in preparation he moves to lie between Hannibal’s thighs. ‘Turn over, if you please.’

Without hesitation, Hannibal rolls again onto his stomach, and for a moment Will contents himself with gazing upon the golden-skinned beauty of the man, lithe and fit from the active lifestyle of riding and walking that country living provides. Setting a palm to the dip between Hannibal’s shoulder blades, he strokes down, down, down to the curve of his bottom. He grazes kisses across each firm cheek, and gently pulls them apart.

‘Lift up for me,’ he instructs huskily.

He feels Hannibal’s momentary hesitation before obediently his lover moves tuck his knees beneath him. There it is, that pink and furled entrance. Slowly, Will bends, and when he blows gently across it, he feels Hannibal shudder beneath him. He sets his mouth to it in an intimate kiss, and tentatively traces the ring of muscle with his tongue. When he licks it, Hannibal arches up hard.

‘Be still,’ orders Will huskily, before returning to his task with a vigorous enthusiasm that pulls deep groans from his lover.

Hannibal’s forehead is pressed to his folded arms, back curved in a beautiful bow, breathing harsh.

‘Good,’ murmurs Will. ‘Now allow me to prepare you.’ But rather than reaching for the oil, he sets his mouth once again to that most vulnerable of places, kissing and lapping, easing the way, until he works his tongue tip inside and Hannibal *moans*, a raw and wrecked sound.

Only then does Will apply the oil to his fingertips, massaging the entrance already relaxed and slicked by his tongue. And when finally he takes himself in hand and presses in, he watches his cock disappearing into that warm sheath and groans at the squeeze of muscles contracting around him.

‘Perfect,’ rasps Hannibal. ‘You feel perfect inside me. Now move, little ladybird. Fuck me hard.’

Inflamed by his words, Will seizes Hannibal’s hips and sets to penetrating him in fast, frantic thrusts. The tightness around his cock is pulling him inexorably towards orgasm, and he reaches down to wrap his fist around Hannibal’s own, larger cock, already leaking. He presses his thumb beneath the head, rubbing back and forth.

‘Shall you come for me? Hm? Come, my lord. Come on my cock.’

‘My name,’ groans Hannibal, pushing into his hand. ‘Give me my name.’

Will works himself in as deep as he can, settling flush against Hannibal’s back, and whispers against his ear, ‘Hannibal, my Hannibal. Come for me, my darling.’

At this, Hannibal jerks so violently that Will almost loses his grip, and as he feels his lover pumping his release across the covers, he too pulses hard, milked by rippling muscles, a cry ripped from his throat as his body pulls taut, pleasure peaking.

In the afterglow, Will curls into Hannibal’s body, and they trade soft caresses and sleepy kisses before eventually discomfort drives them into the washroom, where the tub awaits them, freshly filled with hot water. Although this is Randall’s practice every morning, it is yet early, and the thought that the valet must have been alerted by the sounds coming from Hannibal’s bedchamber brings a stain of red to Will’s cheeks. Even so, he continues to cling to Hannibal, unable to bear being parted from him for even a moment after the intensity of their lovemaking. Hannibal seems equally determined not to be separated from *him*, and as they sit entwined in the bathtub, Will lays his cheek against his lover’s shoulder and surrenders to the sweetness of feeling utterly and completely cherished.

***

After a morning spent quietly together, Will is left for an hour in the library while Hannibal attends a meeting with his steward - a meeting from which he emerges grim-faced.

‘There is a new incumbent at the church where my father and Violet wed. He told Crawford that his predecessor died some years since. A seizure took him quite unexpectedly.’

Will casts aside his book and hastens to Hannibal’s side, slipping his arms around him as they stand together in the library doorway.

‘It was never a very promising lead,’ he reminds him gently. ‘And it does at least mean that Lord Wyvern is denied the opportunity to use the clergyman in his schemes.’

‘You are right,’ sighs Hannibal, dropping a kiss onto his hair. ‘Well, let us hope that the Lords Price are more successful. If all goes as planned, they should be back in London by tonight and dining with Lady Mores.’

‘And when does Lord Wyvern return for his answer?’

‘In three days.’

Will tilts his head, worried gaze meeting Hannibal’s. ‘Is there time for a letter to get here from London, should his aunt be persuaded to write one?’

‘Barely, but yes, it can be done,’ Hannibal assures him, and he bends to nudge his lips against Will’s, hesitant at first, but when Will opens eagerly to him, deepening the kiss with flattering fervour.

‘And in the meantime,’ says Will a trifle breathlessly, as they break apart, ‘there is the matter of the special licence. Now that Mr Budge has it in his possession, he can surely tell us definitively whether it has been interfered with.’

‘Indeed.’ Hannibal’s gaze is still riveted on Will’s lips, and even as he speaks he dips his head to claim another kiss. ‘He has travelled to Sheffield to consult with a former colleague on the matter, and he plans to return tomorrow. Just another three days, little ladybird, and with luck we may be free of Wyvern once and for all.’

***

Despite Hannibal’s optimistic words, the days that follow prove most trying. That very evening, the weather takes an unexpected turn, strong winds and lashing rain lasting all through the night and into the next day, keeping them confined to the house - and, more worryingly, delaying Mr Budge’s return. The second day sees at least an end to the rain, yet the wind does not ease until evening. So it is that the morning of the twenty-eighth of June dawns with no sign either of Mr Budge or a letter from London.

Will wakes to a cold bed and a worried-looking Randall.

‘Where is he?’ he asks as he slips from the bed and hastens to the dressing table.

‘His Lordship said something about inspecting the grotto after the storm, sir.’

‘And has he breakfasted?’

‘He has not, sir.’

Randall’s disapproval matches Will’s own, and he does not linger over his ablutions.

‘I shall fetch him back,’ he says, barely able to check his impatience as Randall ties his cravat. ‘We should be here when Mr Budge returns. I daresay he will have had a difficult journey after all that rain. Ask Chilton to have something cold prepared for breakfast, would you, Randall? Enough for three. And if Mr Budge should arrive before us, he should be offered refreshment immediately. Have Chilton put him in the Oak Room.’

‘Yes, sir.’ Randall’s eyes reflect warm approval, and as he steps back, he says with uncharacteristic solemnity, ‘I am very glad that His Lordship has you to look out for him, Mr Graham. He has found his match, if I may say so.’

‘Why, I - thank you, Randall.’ Hardly knowing how to respond to such startling sentiment, Will squeezes the valet’s shoulder. ‘I am very glad that he has you. And Chilton. Everyone at Lecter House, in fact. I have rarely known a more loyal and devoted staff.’

‘His Lordship is a rare master,’ says Randall quietly. ‘There is no one hereabouts who would say anything different. And the same went for his father - despite what *some* might claim to the contrary.’

Will refrains from enquiring as to Randall’s precise meaning. Whatever the staff might know of what has been occurring, it is not Will’s place to discuss such matters with them. What is important is that their loyalties are clearly aligned with their master. Thus, with a grateful smile, he leaves Randall to his duties and hastens off in search of Hannibal.

Still, as he steps out into the brilliant summer sunshine, Will has to fight back a sudden wave of desolation at the thought that there will, inevitably, come a day when all of this is lost to him. When *Hannibal* is lost to him. It is all very well for Randall to pronounce them a match, but Will knows better. For men of Hannibal’s station may whisper sweet nothings to their kept lovers in the privacy of their bedchambers, but they do *not* marry them.

Even when their lovers are most desperately in love with them.

Stay

From his vantage point above the grotto, Hannibal surveys the landscape that has, for the past two days, been battered by the elements. There seem to have been few casualties - the odd fallen tree that would have been brought down anyway sooner or later - and the grotto itself is undamaged. Even the bandstand appears no more the worse for wear, excepting of course the dry rot for which there is little cure except a complete refurbishment.

After the drowsy closeness of summer days and the recent freshening storm, the air is saturated with the scents of the forest: pine and honeysuckle, wild garlic, and sun-warmed moss. Hannibal plucks a

bruised petal from the overhanging cluster of roses, rubbing it between thumb and forefinger, his thoughts drifting to Will. He will be awake by now and, doubtless, unimpressed by Hannibal's absence. Perhaps contrarily, the thought of the scolding to come provokes a smile. A smile which is hastily covered as his lover appears suddenly, marching down the pathway that skirts the pond. The boy stops, dark head tilting up as he looks towards the bandstand, and Hannibal raises a hand in welcome. His gesture is received with an exasperated shake of the head as promptly Will resumes his march.

Deeming it best to allow his boy to come to *him*, Hannibal sits down atop the raised stone platform that forms the centre of the bandstand. Steps, carved out of the hillside, wind spiral-like up and around the structure, the top step broadening at the base of the viewing platform. When presently Hannibal hears the clatter of boots on the oak floorboards, he pats the warm stone.

'You seem in a terrible hurry, little ladybird. Come sit by me and catch your breath.'

In the next moment, Will is beside him, a flurry of red cheeks and flying curls. 'Of course I am in a hurry! I have come to fetch you back. Mr Budge could return at any moment, and we have Lord Wyvern's return to plan for, and -'

Curving a firm hand around Will's slender nape, Hannibal draws him in and seals their mouths together in a long, thorough kiss. So thorough that by the time they part, Will is halfway in his lap, and Hannibal's cheeks are as hot as his boy's.

'That is better,' he murmurs, nuzzling against Will's nose. 'I neglected to kiss you good morning before I left our bedchamber, and I have been regretting the lapse ever since.'

'Well, that is what happens when you sneak out without waking me.' Will's gaze is mildly reproachful. '*Our* bedchamber?' he queries softly, something sweetly hopeful in the cadence of his words.

'Ours, darling,' Hannibal confirms huskily, and he is immediately tugged close for another kiss.

The tentative slide of Will's tongue between Hannibal's lips is a delightful tease; securing Will's face between his hands, Hannibal suckles on that plump little organ until Will is moaning and clutching at his coat lapels.

'I must have been out of my senses to have left you unravished this morning,' breathes Hannibal, with a final suck on Will's lower lip before he draws back slowly. 'I shall, I promise, make amends for it tonight.'

'Hm.' Will regards him severely. 'However delightful a prospect that might be, it was not the lack of a ravishment that brought me out here, as well you know.'

'Yes, yes. Mr Budge is expected, and the courier from London, and this afternoon Wyvern shall bring with him both his unpleasant countenance and his ultimatum.' Hannibal's brows draw together. 'Forgive me if I choose to spend the morning out here, away from all the intrigues and unpleasantness.'

'And me?'

'Not at all, as well you know.' Brushing a kiss against Will's brow. 'Besides, I had a notion that you would come and find me. Why do you think I informed Randall of my plan?'

‘How terribly arrogant you are.’ But Will is smiling as he snuggles close again. ‘To speak truth, I was surprised by it. You seemed most reluctant to linger when first you brought me out this way.’

‘So I was.’ Hannibal casts his gaze around the faded elegance of the bandstand. ‘Perhaps it is this business with Wyvern, but I find myself thinking more kindly of my mother than I have in many years. As a boy, I resented her terribly for her absences - yet I grew almost to dread her return. For each time she would charm forgiveness out of us all, only to break our hearts anew when inevitably she left again.’

‘She had the burden of knowing that she was your father’s second choice. It cannot have been an easy thing to live with.’

‘Not to mention living so close to Wyvern Abbey, and the constant reminder that Violet - and her son - must have presented,’ muses Hannibal. ‘Yet even after my mother told me the story of my father's betrayal, I could not let go of my resentment of *her*. When she died, it felt like the final abandonment, and I shut up my heart against her.’

‘You are too hard on yourself,’ says Will, pulling back to regard Hannibal with serious eyes, ‘for it seems to me you had every right to feel aggrieved by her actions. You were her child, and she could have chosen to put your welfare above her own. The fact that she did not pains me.’ His gaze falls to the buttons on Hannibal’s coat. ‘It pains me greatly.’

‘Will.’ Gaze tender, Hannibal strokes one rosy cheek.

‘Hannibal, I - wish to tell you something.’

Will appears to be struggling with some inner dilemma, blue eyes darting upwards almost nervously.

‘What is it?’ And, when Will continues to hesitate, ‘I hope you know that there is nothing you cannot say to me.’

Even as the words pass his lips, Hannibal wonders at the undeniable truth of them, at the bond that has formed in so short a time between them, and at the secret hope he harbours that Will has grown as fond of him as he has of his clever, amusing, beguiling boy…

‘It is just that,’ as slender fingers worry at Hannibal’s coat buttons, ‘I do not want you to think that I would abandon you, should things not go in your favour with Lord Wyvern. I would not.’ Will’s gaze falls again, and his throat works in a hard swallow. ‘I would stay with you. Not because of our contract, and - and not only for the twelvemonth.’ He looks up again, a sheen of tears in his eyes. ‘I would stay with you for as long as you wanted me.’

It is rare for Hannibal to be at a loss for words, but for several seconds he remains frozen, scarcely able to parse his feelings - to do anything, in fact, other than stare, dumbfounded, at the boy. Only when Will begins to look stricken at his continued silence does he shake himself to action, enfolding Will in a fierce hug.

‘I want you,’ he whispers hoarsely against Will’s hair. ‘Gods, how I want you. And whatever the outcome of this awful business, you *shall* stay with me. Not from any sense of obligation but because we both wish it. Yes?’

‘Yes.’ It is a trembling affirmation, and Will turns his head, seeking Hannibal’s mouth. ‘Oh, yes, please.’

Hannibal kisses him back, open-mouthed, devouring, in this fervent sealing of their new bargain. Passions roused, they cling together, and Hannibal is not sure whose fingers unloosen whose breeches; he cares only for the primal satisfaction of their bared throbbing flesh rutting together. Will takes hold of Hannibal's hand and sucks two fingers into his mouth, wetting them with the flat of his tongue, releasing him only to guide that hand down between his thighs.

He rises on his knees, eyes almost wild as he straddles Hannibal's lap. 'I want you inside me. Please, Hannibal.'

'Darling.'

Dropping his forehead to rest against Will's shoulder, Hannibal acquiesces gladly, relishing Will's broken moan as he slides first one finger and then the other into that warm channel. Crooking them, he massages the little bud that he knows will soon have Will clinging to him, demanding in that high voice he loves to be *taken, filled, fucked*. But for once, he ignores his boy's high-handed demands, pulling free only to swipe his fingers through their shared precome before penetrating Will again, continuing to tease and torment the swelling bundle of nerves until the boy is almost insensible, head lolling, mouth slack. Only then does Hannibal take himself in hand, easing the way with their own slick, and feeding his cock into Will's tight body. The velvet grip on his cock is almost unbearably pleasurable, but he moves slowly at first, aware of the need for care given their relative unpreparedness. Will, however, seems to have other ideas, rolling his hips insistently, working himself up and down with such fevered desperation that Hannibal quickly abandons all notions of tentativeness, fingers digging into his boy's hips as he thrusts upwards faster and deeper. The clenching heat of Will's body is an exquisite torment, and harsh pants are torn from Hannibal as he is driven closer and closer to the peak of pleasure. But first, he will see Will sated. He holds the boy still, working his hips in shallow passes across that hidden sweet spot, curling his hand around Will's dripping cock.

'Come for me, my little ladybird,' he growls, jerking him hard and fast.

'Hannibal,' moans Will, long lashes wet-tipped, tensing and arching beautifully as he sobs through his climax. 'Hannibal.'

Shudders wrack the boy's frame, the rippling of his inner muscles tipping Hannibal over into his own frenzied release, and he spills hot and deep.

For long moments, they sag against each other. Finally, Hannibal eases himself free before taking Will again into his arms, rocking him gently, heart entirely too full for the utterance of any more words.

***

At Will's suggestion, they make use of the pond's deep waters to freshen themselves, leaving their clothes on the bankside and swimming several lengths before resting together in the shallows. And now that he has permission to kiss that sultry little mouth as often he likes, Hannibal takes great pleasure in cradling Will's jaw and lavishing attentions on his boy until he looks dazed and pleased and delightfully disarranged once more.

Their return to the house is unhurried, their newfound closeness a fortifying comfort in the face of whatever difficulties might be ahead. Chilton is remarkably restrained, offering no comment on the prolific smudges of grass and earth on their clothes, or the less than flawless retying of their cravats. He does, however, bear news that prompts a tense exchange of looks.

'Mr Budge has returned, my lord. As per Mr Graham's instructions, I have put him in the Oak Room.'

‘Thank you, Chilton. And have you fed him?’

‘He is being served now, sir. I have put out a cold repast, that you and Mr Graham might also take something. If you would care to join Mr Budge, I shall have a pot of tea brought up.’

‘Better make it coffee,’ is Hannibal’s grim correction. ‘This day may prove to be taxing for us all.’

‘We shall get through it together, shall not we, Chilton?’ Will looks between them, calm resolve in his steady blue gaze and the determined set of his chin.

‘We shall, sir.’ And Chilton fairly beams.

The three of them part ways, Chilton heading below stairs to the kitchen, Hannibal and Will crossing the Painted Hall in search of Budge. At the threshold of the Oak Room, Hannibal tugs Will back to drop a quick kiss on his upturned mouth.

‘Thank you,’ he murmurs, ‘for charming the worry out of poor Chilton, and for organising everything so splendidly this morning.’

‘I had no idea of *charming* anyone, although I too am glad to see Chilton looking less careworn. As for this morning, really I did very little,’ protests Will, ‘except exercise common sense. Poor Mr Budge will be in need of respite after the trials of the last few days. And you,’ eyeing Hannibal severely, ‘are in definite need of sustenance.’

‘Actually, I am feeling rather replete,’ grins Hannibal wickedly, earning himself an eye roll and a push towards the doorway.

Upon their entrance, Budge rises hastily from his seat, and Hannibal gestures at once for him to sit back down.

‘Mr Budge, it is good to see you back safe at last. We have come to join you for breakfast if you do not mind.’

‘Mind, my lord? My goodness, no. It is very good of you to have thought of me at all in this regard.’ Bowing and smiling, Budge resumes his seat.

‘I blush to admit it, Mr Budge, but it was Mr Graham who ensured that you would have a good meal to come back to.’

Budge appears taken aback for a moment, although he covers his surprise quickly enough. ‘Then I am much obliged to you, Mr Graham.’

‘I only gave instruction, Mr Budge, which as we both know I am well-practiced at,’ says Will wryly.

Not for the first time, Hannibal wonders exactly how Will had comported himself while living under the baron’s roof. He has an inkling, if the pouting, strutting wanton he had first encountered at Quant's was any indication. Yet more and more he is convinced that *that* Will was a pretence, a well-rehearsed act. The boy he has known this last month in Derbyshire, while undeniably sensual and headstrong, is something *more*. Astute, sensitive, capable, and possessed of deep feeling. His tremulous confession at the grotto had been ample evidence of that. Pride in his boy burns bright, and Hannibal finds himself wanting all those who have seen only the spoiled flirt to know and admire the young man beneath.

‘You had the foresight to give such instruction,’ he points out, pulling out a chair for Will before taking his own seat opposite, ‘therefore I must insist that you accept Mr Budge’s praise.’

‘I must order breakfast more often,’ comes the dry retort. ‘Mr Budge, how was the journey from Sheffield?’

‘A mite trying, sir. The public coach set off at six but the roads across the moors were water-logged; it almost doubled the journey,’ says Budge, attacking with enthusiasm a generous slice of pork pie. ‘However, the delays of these past days notwithstanding, I think you will be glad that I made the trip, my lord.’

Hannibal pauses in the spreading of jam over his toast. ‘Then you have been able to confirm that the special licence has been interfered with?’

‘Without a trace of a doubt.’ Triumphantly, Budge waves his fork in the air. ‘As I had suspected, the date was indeed altered, and recently. My former colleague, Mrs Komeda, was most helpful in assisting me. While it is never possible to be exact in these matters, by means of microscopic examination we were able to ascertain that two different inks were used, with a considerable gap of time existing between them. And in the sample of Lord Wyvern’s handwriting that you were good enough to procure for me, my lord, we found identical matches in the penmanship of certain letters. In short, there is enough evidence of fraud for us to be satisfied that Lord Wyvern would be foolish to allow the document to be scrutinised in a court of law.’

‘Then he is attempting a bluff,’ cries Will, blue eyes alight with indignation. ‘The blackguard would have taken your money and left you fearing the worst, my lord.’

‘Counting, no doubt, on my reluctance to have my family’s honour besmirched by risking a public trial, should I have been tempted to challenge the veracity of his claims,’ comments Hannibal grimly. ‘Thank you, Mr Budge. You have done me a great service and I shall not forget it.’

***

After setting up Mr Budge with a room in which to rest from his journey, they spend the remainder of the morning in the library, curled up together on the sofa. Will, as is now his habit, has kicked off his boots, and he sits with knees drawn up, book balanced upon them, his back to Hannibal’s chest. Idly, Hannibal strokes up and down one slim, stockinged calf as he reads, his chin resting on Will’s dark head. They have swapped books, and he is deriving a great deal of amusement from needling Will about his original choice.

‘Your Mrs Radcliffe seems to enjoy placing her heroine in all manner of perilous situations. It is a wonder that poor Adeline ever finds the time to eat.’

Will snorts. ‘Better to be so occupied than to be pining endlessly after some unworthy heel, as Elizabeth Bennet is with this Wickham fellow.’

‘Keep reading,’ advises Hannibal with a deep chuckle, and they fall again into contented silence.

***

Luncheon comes and goes with no sign of the courier from London. The morning’s ease has leached away, Wyvern’s imminent arrival casting an inevitable gloom, and it is in clipped tones that Hannibal instructs Chilton that they will receive the earl in the orangery.

‘That man shall never again, after today, set foot on my property. Bring him in through the garden, Chilton. Mr Budge can be on hand in the estate office, should his presence be required - he will be able to hear the proceedings well enough from there.’

‘Very good, my lord.’ Tone quietly sympathetic, Chilton bows and leaves them.

Comfort is gained from Will’s arms slipping around Hannibal’s waist from behind, and the press of his cheek to Hannibal’s shoulder as he whispers, ‘Remember, whatever occurs, you shall never lose me. I know that it is not much, but -’

‘Oh, no.’ Solemn, Hannibal turns and gazes down into Will’s earnest face. ‘It is much indeed.’

And as he lowers his head to claim a tender kiss, his heart whispers that it is *everything*.

***

‘What trickery is this?’ blusters Wyvern, on his feet again only moments after having taken his seat, eyes fixed on the special licence which Hannibal holds up before him, just out of reach. ‘You mean to tell me that you had your *whore* steal from me while I was your guest and, as such, supposedly under your protection? Damn your eyes, sir!’

Hannibal rises slowly. ‘For that insult to Mr Graham,’ he snarls, ‘you and I shall be meeting again tomorrow at dawn.’ He feels Will flinch beside him and adds, ‘Unless, of course, you would care to retract your disgusting slur. As for damning *me*, *I* do not recall having attempted fraud and blackmail - not to mention extortion - lately.’

The earl’s pale blue eyes flick nervously between Hannibal and Will, settling finally on Will.

‘I apologise, Mr Graham,’ he mutters stiffly, lowering himself once again onto the wooden bench that is set directly opposite that which Will currently occupies. ‘You know, I hope, that I hold you in better esteem than my words might suggest. I - lost my head for a moment. The shock, you understand.’

Hannibal, too, retakes his seat, and although he cannot yet offer Will the comfort that he would wish to, he hopes that the press of his thigh is balm enough for the present.

‘Oh, I understand you perfectly, sir.’ Will’s tone is coolly composed, although the set of his shoulders remains rigid. ‘And for your sake, I accept your apology.’

‘For my sake, sir?’ repeats Wyvern, bristling anew.

Will’s brows rise. ‘I would think that you have enough to deal with at the present moment without the additional prospect of looking down the sharp end of His Lordship’s blade.’

Nostrils quivering, Wyvern appears to be debating whether to protest again, but thankfully subsides.

‘Now, sir,’ and Hannibal once more draws their unwelcome guest’s attention to the marriage licence, ‘I submit that the date as originally written here was the tenth of August; I further submit that my father and your mother were indeed married the following day, five days short of your mother’s majority. That they were discovered in the closing moments of the wedding ceremony, and separated immediately, is not in doubt. Nor is the fact that both were dealt with ruthlessly by our respective grandparents. However,’ he states with grim emphasis, ‘since pre-contracts existed for both of them, binding them in promise to other people, it is also understandable that they were expected to honour those promises. Do not you think?’

‘I think,’ breathes Wyvern, face now crimson again with indignation, ‘that I have been denied my birthright. These tricks of yours will not answer.’

‘Is that so? Tricks, you say? Then perhaps you require further persuasion.’ Raising his voice a fraction, Hannibal holds Wyvern’s suspicious gaze. ‘Mr Budge, would you have the goodness to step forward, sir?’

All eyes turn towards the estate office, and in only a few moments Budge appears. He presents a formidable picture, brow lowered and eyes grave, hands clasped behind his back, all traces of the amiable steward buried beneath the veneer of the solicitor he had once been.

‘Lord Wyvern, my name is Mr Budge. Count Lecter was good enough to engage me recently in the matter of a case of suspected forgery, and I am just now returned from Sheffield, where the document in question has been examined by a solicitor of no little repute.’

‘Oh yes?’ Paling, Wyvern darts a look behind Budge, as if he expects this solicitor to materialise suddenly.

‘Indeed,’ continues Budge, shaking his head, ‘and I am sorry to say that I have had to relate to His Lordship the news that this document has, indeed, been tampered with.’

‘It, er, has?’

‘Beyond any doubt.’ Budge’s eyes are stern on Wyvern. ‘In fact, you recently took possession of it, did not you? A special licence granted years ago to Filip Lecter and Violet Talbot, whom I believe was your mother.’

‘Yes, yes. Very well. Enough,’ hisses Wyvern, addressing himself now to Hannibal. ‘You have made your point, damn you.’

Hannibal pretends to consider for a moment. Then, with a smile of gratitude for the steward, ‘Thank you, Mr Budge. You may leave us now.’

‘Very good, my lord.’ Bowing, Budge aims one final damning glance at Wyvern, and quietly withdraws.

‘You see, Lord Wyvern, how futile this all was?’ Hannibal allows into his voice a note of sympathy, against which Wyvern instantly bridles. ‘It took the merest scrutiny by an expert in the field of legal documentation for the licence to have been declared altered - and rather clumsily, at that - which means that no barrister of repute would accept your case, should you be audacious enough to attempt to make one.’

Wyvern’s lip curls. ‘Even if what you say is true - and I am admitting nothing, do you hear - then the least that I am due is recompense for a life spent with a father who looked on me with suspicion and resentment until almost his last breath.’

‘Almost? He told you the story, then,’ says Will, arms folded, and eyes narrowed on their unwelcome guest. ‘I had wondered how it was possible that you were so well-versed in the particulars when your mother had died long before you would have been old enough to hear it from her. Your father, I suppose, knew that he was dying and sought to heal the breach between you by explaining the reasons for his animosity.’

Wyvern blanches, fists clenching at his sides before he slumps back on the bench. ‘It was a few days before his death. He instructed me to fetch his papers, that we might go through everything together.’ He laughs, a bitter sound that echoes horribly in the tranquil space. ‘Oh, it was quite the revelation. For not only did he lay before me the story of my mother’s infidelity, and thus his inability to ever fully accept me as his son, but he also confessed that his own irresponsible behaviour has left the estate near-bankrupt.’

‘Hence the fifty thousand pounds.’ Will’s voice is soft in the silence that follows. ‘Such an outrageous demand could only have been borne out of either extreme foolishness or desperation.’

‘Or both.’ Despite himself, Hannibal feels suddenly a sliver of genuine pity for the defeated figure sitting opposite them - a man who quite possibly shares his blood, at least in part. ‘Do you know the penalty for forgery, Lord Wyvern?’

Wyvern’s shudder is answer enough.

‘I shall tell you what is going to happen now.’ Rising, Hannibal extends his hand. ‘First, you shall surrender the copy that you made. I assume that you brought it with you.’ Indeed, after a moment’s hesitation and a sullen look, Lord Wyvern reaches into his pocket and duly hands over the folded document. ‘Next, sir, you shall go back directly to Wyvern Abbey, never to speak of this business again. And in return, I shall send my steward over tomorrow to look at your accounts himself.’ Ignoring the startled looks of both his lover and his guest, he continues, ‘I know of no one with a shrewder head for business than Crawford. If he deems the estate salvageable, then I shall offer you what help I can - if only for the sake of your tenants, who would suffer greatly should the estate fall into the hands of the receivers. However,’ and here he pins Lord Wyvern with a ferocious look, ‘*you* are forbidden from initiating contact with me - on any pretext. Crawford shall maintain a line of communication with your steward. But you, Lord Wyvern, are no longer welcome at Lecter House. These,’ brandishing the licence and its copy, ‘shall remain in my safe-keeping. Do not think to test my resolve in this matter, nor my willingness to use these documents against you should you attempt to cross me a second time. For if you do, then you will find yourself cowering in the shadow of the hangman’s noose. Do you comprehend me, Lord Wyvern?’

A swift indrawn breath and a jerky nod are answer enough. Hannibal rings the bell for Chilton, who hurries in from his station just outside the door. And as the stern butler escorts out the defeated Wyvern, Hannibal turns to gather Will in a tight embrace.

‘Thank the gods that is over,’ he sighs, burying his face in Will’s curls, deriving sweet comfort from the lingering freshness of their morning spent outdoors.

‘It could have been more definitively over,’ says Will with soft wryness, ‘had not you decided to try to save his estate.’

‘You think me wrong?’ asks Hannibal, pulling back to meet his lover’s gaze.

But he is met with a smile. ‘Actually, I think you rather splendid. You have a good heart, my lord.’

‘It is not only for the sake of the tenants of Wyvern Abbey that I felt compelled to offer aid,’ admits Hannibal. ‘If the late earl had not been so tortured by his betrothed’s betrayal, then perhaps he might have been less careless with his estate and more merciful on the boy he was charged with raising.’

‘I wonder what Lord Wyvern’s aunt would have revealed, had she agreed to write that letter,’ muses Will.

‘We may yet find out. It was never very likely that it would have arrived in time for Wyvern’s ultimatum. But thanks to you, my clever boy,’ brushing a kiss against Will’s temple, ‘I had the magnificent Mr Budge in my corner. In the end, he was enough.’

‘All part of the service,’ grins Will.

‘And a fine service it was, indeed.’ Hannibal punctuates the words with more grazing kisses, on Will’s brow, the apple of his cheek, the corner of his mouth. ‘I wonder, how might you like to serve me next, hm?’

Will makes a soft sound of need and turns his head to press their lips together. For long moments, then, Hannibal enjoys simply holding and kissing his boy; but the knowledge that Mr Budge is waiting in the estate office, and the awareness that Chilton might reappear at any time, soon necessitates a curtailment of their affectionate exchange.

‘Tonight,’ he promises in a whisper, and Will hums a smiling agreement against his lips.

***

Two days later, on the last morning of June, the courier arrives from London bearing *two* letters: one, a short note from Lord James; the second, an elegantly-penned envelope from Lady Frances Hyde. Hannibal tucks them into his coat pocket, and riding out with Will to their favourite spot by the river, waits until the horses are set to grazing before settling in the long grass beside his boy and breaking the seals of both missives.

Lord James’ he reads aloud first:

Dear Lecter,

I am all but certain that these letters will not reach you by the date that we had hoped. Although Brian and I made excellent time back to London, my mother was not in the best of health when we arrived, and she was not able to receive us until a full two days later. That delay did, however, result in our meeting all together for luncheon on a day when Lady Frances was included in the party.

During the course of the afternoon, we relayed to Lady Frances the very difficult circumstance in which you find yourself. I must say that her response was excessively sympathetic, and Brian and I are greatly consoled by our conviction that her letter will have the power to make all right with you, should Lord Wyvern attempt his worst. (Knowing you as we do, and admiring the resourcefulness of Mr Graham, we are sure that you will have worked out a way of stalling the earl if necessary.)

Do please write to us as soon as you are able, and let us know how things stand. We both look forward enormously to seeing you and Mr Graham in London before too long.

I remain your friend,

J. Price.

‘I cannot say that I have ever liked anyone quite so well as the Lords Price,’ sighs Will, ‘excepting Lord Verger and Lady Margot. You are truly fortunate in your choice of friends, my lord.’

‘Stop *my lord*ing me,’ complains Hannibal, aiming a light swipe at the delectable backside currently wrigging in the air beside him. ‘Now, let us see what Wyvern’s aunt has to tell us.’

Dear Count Lecter,

I should like to begin by offering a heartfelt apology on behalf of my appalling nephew. He has, perhaps, forgotten that I still breathe, else his stupidity in attempting this scheme exceeds what even I thought him capable of.

My dear friend Lady Mores' son has acquainted me with the particulars of your situation. I can only imagine your distress, but I hope that what I have to relate will go some way towards easing it.

Violet Talbot, as she was then, was a particular friend of mine, and I was overjoyed when our parents arranged her marriage to my brother, Robert. Arranged marriages were far more common then, of course, but still Violet seemed happy enough with the choice that had been made for her.

In the spring of seventeen hundred and eighty-nine, I was staying with Violet's family in Bath when we met your father at a piano recital. I can still recall the apprehension I felt at the numerous times I would catch them watching each other. There seemed to exist between them a natural ease - and a formidable attraction. After our third time of meeting, at a ball, it became clear even to Violet's parents that the pair had formed an attachment. Our return to Derbyshire was advanced, stern words were exchanged between Violet's father and yours, and Violet was reminded in no uncertain terms of her duty. As badly as I felt for her, it is with a heavy heart that I must admit to having taken her parents' side, on behalf of my brother who was entirely ignorant of these events.

Despite what had occurred at Bath, all seemed well again upon our return north, and plans for the wedding resumed. Then, one day in late summer, I chanced to hear my brother comment that he had seen your father out riding, and that when he had attempted a greeting, your father had cut him. Knowing that your father had returned from abroad made me uneasy, despite it being common knowledge that his own wedding was soon to take place; and as both weddings drew near, I sought to spend more time with Violet, that I might satisfy myself as to her true intentions. This was not always an easy thing to accomplish, for often I would arrive to share luncheon with her only to be informed that she was still abed. Later, she confessed to me that these days followed nights spent clandestinely with your father. (I hope that I do not shock you with my frankness; you will find that it comes as a privilege of age.)

A fortnight prior to the wedding, a day came when Violet could not be found in the house. A calamitous turn, for it was discovered that a bag was missing from her room, along with several items of sentimental value and her best gown. I was present when Violet's maid was questioned; the poor girl was terrified, and readily admitted her part in having concealed Violet's absence from the house the night before. It was she who furnished Violet's parents with the name of the church which their daughter was, even then, entering upon the arm of your father. And although I was not present when the lovers were apprehended, I do remember very well that Violet had not yet reached her majority. For it was I who sat with her on her birthday, days later, holding her as she cried. Such sounds of grief are not to be forgotten, nor is the fact that she had no reason to stifle her sobs - for the family were all gone to attend the wedding of Filip Lecter, Viscount Visconti, to Lady Simonetta Sforza.

I hope, my lord, that by laying before you the whole sad history, I can make an end to my nephew's mischief. His behaviour has been abhorrent; and while some little allowance might be made for the shock of discovery, it is hardly an excuse for blackmail! Alas, he and my brother rarely saw eye to eye. Too often over the years did I witness Francis' defiance of his father. Perhaps Robert could also have been kinder - although goodness knows he had his own demons to contend with - but then we are all invariably wise after an event, are not we?

As for Francis' belief that he was fathered by the late count, I believe it to be a false one, for upon his birth I recall many exclamations (of relief, I might add) over his close resemblance to my brother, a resemblance that has only grown with the passing years. To be sure, we cannot know it for an

irrefutable fact, but I am certain enough to feel able to counsel you not to dwell on the other, less desirable possibility. Francis' stubborn streak is no doubt responsible for his continued self-delusion, but that is not something that should burden you.

My hopes go with you for a swift resolution of this matter.

Frances Hyde.

Soberly, Hannibal sets aside the letters, and for a few moments there is silence.

'What a remarkable lady,' he says at length. 'It must be quite something to know her.'

'Such frankness and generosity of spirit is a rarity,' muses Will. Then, with a sudden grin, 'I am almost sorry that you have now no occasion to confront Lord Wyvern with his aunt's letter. *Appalling nephew* indeed!'

'As for that,' shudders Hannibal, 'I would like it very much if we ceased talking about the villain.'

Will pushes himself up from the ground and crawls into Hannibal's lap. 'With the greatest of pleasure,' he murmurs against Hannibal's lips, 'my lord.'

For an instant, Hannibal considers scolding the boy for the persistent use of his title; but as warm lips connect with his, he decides that a thorough ravishment will be a far better use of his time.

Such, after all, is the natural inclination of one so very much in love.

Not engaged

The second week of July brings with it yet another missive - one of a far more enjoyable nature than those most lately received.

‘The Lord Lieutenant is to give a ball.’

‘Lord Bloom?’ Will snatches the invitation from Hannibal’s fingers. ‘Really? When?’

‘Imp. Your manners are truly atrocious.’

Deftly evading his lover's seeking hands, Will twirls away across the library, eyes rapt on the gilt-edged card.

'It is to be held at Floris Hall in just over three weeks' time. Why so long?'

'Because, pouting boy, it is to be a costume ball. And speaking as one who has on occasion undertaken such a venture, it requires a great deal of planning - not to mention time enough for the guests to devise and acquire their ensembles.'

'Most will have attended your ball, which means that they have their costumes already.'

Hannibal raises an eyebrow, mock-imperious. 'Wear the same outfit twice in a season? What a scandalous suggestion! No, be assured, three weeks is little enough time for all to be made ready.'

Perhaps it is as a result of the very grave business that they have just concluded, but Will is light-headed at the thought of fun and frivolity.

'Where shall we find our costumes?'

Chuckling, Hannibal holds out his hand, and with skipping steps Will returns to the sofa. Instead of resuming his former seat, however, he settles himself in Hannibal's lap.

'Well?'

'Well, it so happens that we have a vast collection in the attic, collected over half a century - longer, I shouldn't wonder. Of course, we could apply to one of the warehouses instead -'

'Oh no, this shall be much more fun. Can we go up there now?'

'Tomorrow,' is Hannibal's firm reply. 'The costumes must first be looked out and inspected for damage or mould. I shall have the best laid out ready for us to try on, and whatever we choose can be sent away for alterations if necessary.'

'But would not it be more of an adventure if we found them out ourselves? Please,' wheedles Will, feathering little kisses along Hannibal's jaw, at the corner of his mouth, finally on lips that soften and part beneath his.

The conversation halts while they kiss, leisurely and long. Never, thinks Will as he presses closer, will he have enough of this. Always now, Hannibal holds him as if something precious, and every kiss is as thrilling as the first. Whoever knew that being in love was so all-consuming? Of course, he cannot know for certain Hannibal's true feelings, but his heart whispers that such perfect communion as exists between them must be borne out of something more pure, more sacred than mere lust.

'Oh, very well,' smiles Hannibal at length, as Will nestles happily against him. 'I shall send Randall up to unlock the trunks, that we may sort through them ourselves after dinner. But I must say, you drive a hard bargain, little ladybird.'

***

The idea of trying on costumes by candlelight is vastly appealing, and Will's romantic visions prove delightfully accurate when, later that evening, he follows Hannibal up a flight of dusty stairs into a cavernous space that is aglow with candelabra. Randall, standing to attention, gestures to half a dozen enormous trunks that have been flung open for their perusal.

‘I cannot speak as to the condition of every item, my lord, but the air in here is reasonably dry. There should be plenty to choose from.’

‘Good work, Randall. You may consider yourself retired for the night.’

‘Are you sure, sir?’ Randall’s expression is comically hopeful.

‘We shall manage very well for ourselves. Off with you.’

As Randall’s departing footsteps grow faint, Will says with a grin, ‘You do realise that he is carrying on a scorching affair with your head groom?’

‘With *Franklyn*?’

Hannibal’s expression is so appalled, Will laughs aloud.

‘Certainly with Franklyn. Why not? I am ashamed to admit that I discounted him when first I saw him, but he rather grows on one over time.’

‘Oh, does he?’ Soft, almost menacing, Hannibal prowls towards him. ‘And you discounted him for what, exactly?’

‘You know what. Now do not look at me like that - it was very early in our acquaintance.’ A giggle bubbling up in his throat, Will backs away, treading carefully between the scattered trunks. ‘A shame, too, for from what Joel has told me, Franklyn is game for anything.’

‘*Joel*? Are you, by any chance, referring to Summers? The *footman*?’ growls Hannibal, gaining ground between them. ‘Since when have you been consorting with the servants?’

‘Oh, Joel - that is, Summers, is a splendid fellow. We have had several engaging chats while you have been locked away in your afternoon meetings.’

'Awful boy!’

Lunging, Hannibal catches him around the waist and hauls him in for a bruising kiss. Will plunges his fingers into the thickness of Hannibal’s hair and kisses him back with messy enthusiasm. Breaking off, Hannibal presses their foreheads together, glowering darkly.

‘You enjoyed that.’

‘I always enjoy kissing you,’ murmurs Will dreamily.

Hands tighten on his waist in warning. ‘As well as provoking me to jealousy, hm? Well, that settles it. Tomorrow I shall instruct Chilton to have the hunting tower stocked and made ready for guests.’

‘Why? Who shall be visiting?’ asks Will, eyes brightening in anticipation.

‘*We* shall. The day after tomorrow.’ Stern eyes fix on him. ‘And we shall not stir from thence until I have fucked the insolence out of you, brat.’

This sets Will’s heart skipping and cock stirring. ‘How perfectly wonderful,’ he says huskily, and brushes his lips across Hannibal’s once more before tugging himself free. ‘Come, then. We had best make our plans for the ball with all haste. Let us look through all of the lovely things that Randall has found out for us.’

And lovely they are, outfits waiting to transform the wearer into king or conqueror, jester or page. Materials in every shade, of every type: silks, satins, velvets, muslins. Some trimmed with fur or lace, others decorated with beads, sequins or pearls. Hats and headdresses of all shapes. And every kind of footwear, from Hessian boots to delicate slippers.

Will rifles through trunk after trunk with glee, hardly aware at first that Hannibal is not similarly occupied. It is only after he has exclaimed over the half-dozenth article that he notices his lover sitting upon an upturned box, watching him, expression indulgent.

‘What is this? Have you given up already?’

‘On the contrary.’ And, oh, Will knows *that* husky tone. ‘It is only that at present I am more pleasantly engaged, little ladybird.’

‘I see.’ Concealing a smile, Will reaches for a slip of material in green silk that he has unearthed from beneath a set of angel wings. ‘Do you wish me to model something for you?’

Hannibal folds his arms, eyes gleaming with interest. ‘Why not?’

‘I thought perhaps I could be your Endymion.’ Slipping free the buttons of his coat, Will shrugs out of it before beginning on his waistcoat. ‘A tunic and sandals, with a belt of brown leather. A simple illusion but effective, do not you think?’

He continues undressing, unhurried, aware of the subtle change in the atmosphere. Both of them breathing a little more shallowly, cheeks painted a little darker. When finally Will stands naked, he lingers for a few moments before his lover’s admiring gaze and contrives a stretch, a little performance to nudge them both to remembering that first evening at Quant's. His cock is filling as he takes the silk tunic and slips it over his head, tugging it down and smoothing it over his hips.

‘It is a little short.’

‘A little?’ snorts Hannibal. ‘Come here.’

Obediently, Will moves to stand between Hannibal’s parted thighs. Hands, soft and seeking, push beneath the tunic’s hem, fingertips grazing the swell of Will’s bottom before skating over his hips.

‘It is almost indecent. Would you have all at the ball gaze on you thus?’ A thumb brushes against the side of his cock. ‘Well?’

‘It could be let out.’ Will bites his lip as Hannibal traces up and down his stiffening length.

‘You are determined, then, to parade yourself in this flimsy thing?’

He is released, although only momentarily. Hannibal’s hands thread next into his hair, tightening to tug his head back, exposing his throat to a rasping tongue and gently scraping teeth. As that seeking mouth moves lower, Will’s eyes fall closed. The flick of a nipple through silk draws a whimper, a sucking kiss to that same erect nub dampening the material until it clings, pulling a groan. Hannibal rubs his cheek against Will’s chest in delicious friction.

‘On second thought, I think I rather like it on you.’

‘You d-do?’

‘Mm.’ He is held away for a few moments, and a hot gaze rakes down his body. Will, too, looks down and sees the shape of his cock tenting the silk. A wet spot has formed and he swallows a moan at the sight of it. ‘Such a pretty thing.’

‘Hannibal.’ He releases a shaky breath. ‘Touch me.’

‘Oh, I shall.’

Leisurely kisses are pressed to Will’s stomach, his abdomen, lower and lower until Hannibal’s mouth hovers over the ridge of Will’s straining cock. And when a hot tongue laves it through the thin tunic, Will whines and clutches at Hannibal’s hair.

‘More.’

He pants and writhes as Hannibal closes his lips around the tip, sucking softly, the added friction of wet silk against Will’s skin almost torturously pleasurable. But when Will thrusts forward, seeking more of that wonderful mouth, his moans growing louder, Hannibal draws off him and stands, eyes black and glittering.

‘How beautiful you are.’ Large hands close on Will’s shoulders and gently he is turned around. ‘Look, darling.’ His chin is lifted and his gaze directed to a shadowy corner where - *oh* - a large mirror, free-standing, glints in the candlelight. ‘See.’

Will watches, enraptured, as Hannibal pushes the saturated material up his hips, arranging it carefully so that the bunched hem rests atop his jutting cock.

‘There.’ Hannibal brushes the backs of his fingers across the red tip and they come away glistening. ‘Perfect.’

Eyes fixed on Will, he brings his hand to his mouth and *licks*, and with a whimper Will begs, ‘Let me have your mouth again.’

‘Sweet boy.’

Hannibal’s hand snakes back down to enclose Will's cock, and as he begins a slow fisting, Will groans.

‘I asked for your mouth.’

‘I am aware.’ Hannibal nips gently at the curve of his neck. ‘Patience, darling.’

But patience is in short supply, particularly when Hannibal begins sucking on his earlobe. Will shivers, squirms, and rocks back into the hardness slotting between his cheeks.

‘I will come.’

‘You will not.’

The command, uttered in dark tones, brings fresh colour to Will's cheeks. And now Hannibal’s other hand is at his chest, rubbing and plucking at his nipples through the sheer silk. Will pants, bucking into his lover’s fist.

‘Let me come.’

‘No.’

He can only watch, helpless, as Hannibal strums his body to perfect tautness for minute after tormenting minute. On the brink, Will turns his face into Hannibal’s coat, almost sobbing his plea for release. And only then does Hannibal move around to kneel again before him, nuzzling his leaking cock, licking it in long swipes, hands cupping his bottom as he lavishes attention on the stiff member. As he curls his tongue around it, Will cries out, hands pulling at Hannibal’s hair. He wants more and yet it is almost too much after so much teasing. Hannibal chuckles, the vibrations adding a new element of stimulation, and then he takes Will deep, and Will throws back his head as he is suckled fiercely, Hannibal’s tongue lapping and stroking. When he presses on the underside *just so*, Will feels the unmistakable swell of tight heat that tips him inexorably over into orgasm. He cries out his warning, coming in violent pulses, nails digging convulsively into Hannibal’s scalp, and only when he is entirely soft does Hannibal pull off with one final slow suck. His eyes, as he looks up at Will in the hazy glow of candlelight, are lust-blown.

Shaky, Will drops to his knees. He frames Hannibal’s face between his hands and kisses him, tongue tip sliding across lips that still taste of *him*. He shivers and pulls back.

‘What do *you* want?’ Because Hannibal is still so very hard.

‘You,’ comes the ragged reply. ‘However you like. Your hand, your beautiful mouth. Just - touch me, darling.’

Will makes a soft sound. He slips free the buttons of his lover’s front fall, and Hannibal’s cock protrudes, thick and heavy. Weighing it in his hand, Will closes his fist around its length. He bends, taking just the head between his lips, licking in swirls as he knows Hannibal enjoys. He runs his fingers up and down the shaft, stroking lightly at first, and then more firmly as he sucks harder. Now it is Hannibal’s turn to grasp Will’s hair, fingers lifting and petting his curls.

‘Gods, Will, yes,’ he groans. ‘Do not stop, darling, please.’

And when he comes with a hoarse cry, Will swallows his seed with greedy possessiveness.

For a while they lie together, hands entwined, kissing softly. Until the hardness of the floorboards becomes uncomfortable, and Will allows himself to be tugged back up to his feet. They return their attention to the costumes, Will’s initial choice having been firmly discounted.

‘Except, perhaps, for the bedchamber?’ For which suggestion, he is again roundly kissed.

Eventually he settles upon a sailor’s felt hat, wool shirt, knee-length skilt, and knotted kerchief. A thick leather belt completes the ensemble.

‘What about shoes?’ asks Hannibal, examining him with a critical eye. ‘And breeches?’

‘Sailors up on deck have no need of shoes,’ announces Will airily. ‘And a true sailor would never wear anything beneath his skilt, I am certain.’

‘You wish to parade before me all night half-naked? And in a stranger’s house?’ Hannibal directs at him an appalled look. ‘Absolutely not. If you wish to go as a ruffian sailor, you may, but you shall be clothed decently, do you hear?’

‘I hear, my lord.’ Will resists the childish urge to thrust out his tongue. ‘And what of your costume? Have you found anything *decent* enough? A bishop’s cassock, perchance?’

‘I,’ declares Hannibal haughtily, ‘shall be attending as Stanislaus Augustus, the last Grand Duke of Lithuania.’

He turns and gestures at a long coat of lace-trimmed green velvet set with silver buttons, which he has matched with goatskin breeches, a waistcoat in darker green, and a neckcloth of black silk.

‘High-heeled shoes?’ Will grins. ‘You shall have to be careful where you tread, my lord. No high kicks for you, I think.’

***

Yet for all of their mutual teasing, it is not to be denied that they make a striking couple when, on the last night of July, they proceed arm in arm up the steps of the Lord Lieutenant’s residence. After nearly three weeks of seclusion, Will is in high spirits and eager to see their friends again.

‘I wonder whether we shall recognise them.’

‘Ha. Mark my words, Verger shall come as a jester, and Lady Margot as some manner of mythic goddess. They attend such events for the food, not the costumes.’

‘Still, it will be marvellous to spend time with them again.’

‘Have I kept you too long to myself?’

Will meets Hannibal’s quizzical gaze with one of fulsome tenderness. ‘Not by so much as an hour.’

Indeed, he has adored every moment of their lazy days spent sequestered in the hunting tower and its immediate surroundings - talking and eating, walking in the woods, swimming in the secluded top ponds. And making love every morning, every night, sometimes more often even than that, their mutual passions never far from the surface.

‘Always I shall think of those days with happiness.’ Halting on the threshold, Will leans in and presses an impulsive kiss against the lean plane of his lover’s cheek. ‘Thank you for taking me away.’

‘Even if only to the woods,’ replies Hannibal dryly, but he is smiling as he ushers Will through to the entrance hall.

There stand the Lord Lieutenant and his wife, or Henry the Eighth and Anne Boleyn as their present attire would suggest, speaking with a tall, cloaked highwayman. A short line of guests is assembled behind them, and Will follows Hannibal in dutifully taking his place at the back of the queue. Their hosts appear in no great hurry to move people along, and so Will takes the opportunity to study their surroundings. Floris Hall is a grand house, to be sure, although it possesses neither the grace and refinement of Lecter House nor the rugged spectacle offered by Boarham Hall. Still, its size suggests ample room for entertaining, and for tonight that is all that anyone will care about.

Standing at last before Lord and Lady Bloom, Will bows low, as beside him Hannibal does the same.

‘Count Lecter.’ Dark hair coiled high in a Grecian knot, blue eyes smiling, Lady Bloom greets them warmly. ‘It is good to see you again. And you, Mr Graham.’

‘We are honoured to have been invited, Lady Bloom.’

Will hopes to convey with his smile the full measure of gratitude that he feels; for when he had taken the invitation card from Hannibal’s hand, there had been his name written alongside Hannibal’s. A

small thing, perhaps, but a warming confirmation of the acceptance that Will has found among Hannibal's general acquaintance.

'After the splendid dinner you treated us to last month, it was the least that we could do. Lord Bloom has been pestering me ever since about engaging a French chef once Paul retires. Is not that so, my lord?'

'Hm? Oh, yes indeed, my dear.' Lord Bloom offers a somewhat distracted smile, his eyes flicking continuously to the doorway.

More bows and smiles follow, and they move on to allow their hosts to greet the next set of guests. From the entrance hall, they are directed down a long and narrow corridor, which opens at its furthest end onto a large space ringed by vast mirrored walls. Already, the room is bustling with people in all manner of costumes: sultans, queens, priests, soldiers, shepherdesses - even a mermaid!

Will spots a familiar-looking medieval jester, tufts of red hair protruding from beneath a striped bicorn, and nudges Hannibal with a disbelieving laugh.

'You were right. There is Lord Verger, over by the orchestra.'

'See?' grins Hannibal. 'He has been sporting that damned thing at every costume ball for the last three years. My only surprise is that it is not yet full of holes.' Catching Verger's eye, he waves him over.

'Hello, you two.' Green eyes shine mischief from beneath the ridiculous hat. 'So you have come out of hiding at last! Meg will be annoyed. At the county fair last week, she bet me five guineas that you would come up with some excuse to miss this event as well.'

'Five guineas!' Laughing, Will comments, 'We had best keep out of her way tonight, or else Lady Margot will scold us terribly for emptying her purse.'

'Not a bit of it.' A slender arm is slipped through his, and Will turns to find Lady Margot smiling at him,
draped daringly in white, dark hair loose about her shoulders. 'As it was I who made the match between you, I shall always forgive you everything.'

Blushing, Will seeks to distract from the boldness of Lady Margot's words. 'You look delightful tonight, Lady Margot.'

'She looks as if she has just stepped from her bath,' scoffs Mason. 'Botticelli's Venus, indeed!'

'It is a perfectly respectable gown,' protests Lady Margot. 'Besides, Lady Bloom was full of praise for my ingenuity.'

'*Lady* Bloom was.' Mason smirks. '*Lord* Bloom, on the other hand -'

'Lord Bloom has his own preoccupations,' says Lady Margot, rather mysteriously. 'But come now, the dancing is about to begin, and I have a mind to ask for Mr Graham's hand.'

'I would be honoured,' proclaims Will, darting a mischievous look at Hannibal.

'What the deuce?' Looking comically exasperated, Hannibal turns to Mason. 'Well then, Verger, what say you and I -'

But in the next moment, a masked bandit appears before the group and performs a flourishing bow before a slightly flustered-looking Mason.

‘Lord Verger, would you do me the honour of dancing the first with me?’

‘I - that is, yes, thank you.’

And off Mason is swept. The ballroom is now filling rapidly. As other couples take to the floor, Will indicates with a nod of his head a despondent-looking fox standing on the sidelines, mask ribbons threaded through fair ringleted hair.

‘Is not that Lady Bedelia? Do go over and rescue her, my lord.’

His eyes, dancing merriment, meet Hannibal’s, and with a resigned huff Hannibal accedes.

‘Very well. But you,’ he warns, ‘are *mine* for the next two dances together, do you hear?’

‘Yes, my lord,’ replies Will demurely, heart skipping at the possessiveness of his lover’s tone.

‘Oh, my. What have I created? Come, Mr Graham.’ With rolling eyes, Lady Margot tugs him towards the line of dancers.

As they take their places in the set, Will notices Mason and his bandit conversing further up.

‘Are my eyes deceiving me? Or is that -’

‘Lord Huntingdon,’ confirms Lady Margot with a wink. ‘Oh, there is much that you have missed, Mr Graham. I am pleased to confirm that Mason and dear Nicholas are now very much a matter of public interest, although poor Mason is still getting used to being worshipped and adored.’

‘And how has Mr Brown taken it?’ Will grimaces. ‘I cannot imagine that he was happy to relinquish his claim.’

‘Not at first. However,’ confides Lady Margot as they perform the first figure, ‘I happened to mention to him one evening how very lovely Miss Hobbs was looking, and how she had been most complimentary about his new hat. The next thing I knew, the pair were engaged!’

‘Engaged?’ Will stares at her, aghast. ‘After how many days?’

‘Oh, about eleven, at a guess,’ laughs Lady Margot. ‘But do not look so shocked, Mr Graham. Our little world moves very quickly, as you have surely discovered for yourself.’

Determined that if Lady Margot will not blush then *he* shall not, Will counters, ‘*We* are not engaged.’

‘Are not you?’ On the next turn, Lady Margot mutters crossly, ‘What is the count about?’

‘You cannot truly believe that such a thing would be possible.’ Will stares at her before remembering his manners and hastily offering his hand to lead her up the dance.

‘Can you think of a reason why not?’ she counters.

‘I can think of half a dozen! For one thing, there is my -’ and now Will finally *does* blush, ‘history to consider.’

‘History? You are but seventeen,’ Lady Margot reminds him gently. ‘And you have been out in society for only one season.’

‘I shall not embarrass Your Ladyship by recounting the number of *adventures* I have had in that time.’

‘Dear Will,’ she laughs, ‘we live in the nineteenth century. Who among us has not had a few adventures? Beneath the veneer of polite society there lies a multitude of patched scandals, believe me.’

‘Come, Lady Margot, be frank. When you first approached me in Mayfair, was it marriage that you had in mind as the conclusion of this arrangement?’

Executing another turn, Lady Margot darts him a reproachful look. ‘You know very well that it was not. But I did not know you then, except by reputation as the boy who had captivated half of Quant's. And caught the eye of the most eligible bachelor in the ton,’ she adds slyly.

The most eligible bachelor in the ton is currently engaged in conversation with a red-cheeked Lady Bedelia as they move up the set, and Will is torn between pride and possessiveness at the sight. But moments later his attention is snared by a tall, broad-shouldered man dressed as a soldier from Ancient Rome who is standing beneath the entranceway.

‘Lady Margot, do you know that gentleman? He seems to be watching us.’

They are quite some distance apart, but when the soldier tilts his head in a horribly familiar way, Will’s words dry up, and suddenly all that he can think of is escape. He is certainly in no need of Lady Margot’s rather awed confirmation of his worst fear.

‘Ah, now I believe that is the rather standoffish but terribly handsome Lord Grantham, heir to the Twelfth Earl of Wolfram, and lately returned from Italy.’ Curiosity rampant in her voice, she observes, ‘He is certainly watching. But not us, Will Graham. *You*.’

In a voice that he cannot keep from trembling, Will says, ‘I am so sorry, Lady Margot, but I am feeling a little unwell. Do you mind if we retire?’

Instantly, Lady Margot is all concern. ‘Of course I do not mind. It is uncommonly warm tonight. Look there, my dear. You see those doors just behind the orchestra? They lead onto the terrace. Go out and take some deep breaths and I shall come and check on you presently.’

Will is painfully aware of the looks of curiosity they are drawing as they leave the line and step from the floor mid-dance. He cannot bring himself to look in Hannibal’s direction, and it is with a thudding heart that he hurries, head down, towards the open terrace doors. For he knows that the best he can hope for is a brief respite before he is forced to confront that which he has striven for months to avoid.

His reckoning.

The fancy of a child

Ridding himself of Lady Bedelia takes a little skilful maneuvering, but having successfully handed her on to a willing young baronet, Hannibal makes haste to intercept Margot.

‘You left the floor so precipitously, I had a deuce of a time disentangling myself. Where is he?’

The country dance having been succeeded by a quadrille, most of the guests are now grouped around the various refreshment tables. A steady hum of conversation rises above the music, laughter growing more raucous with every sip of ratafia or punch.

‘Do not fret,’ replies Margot with gentle amusement. ‘Poor dear Will became a trifle overheated, that is all. I sent him outside for some air. I was about to take him a glass of something but perhaps -’

‘I shall go,’ says Hannibal firmly. ‘Thank you for looking after him.’

‘Count Lecter, Lady Margot - what is this?’ Lord Bloom, looking himself more than a little overheated in his padded costume and wool beard, approaches them with an expression of mild reproach. ‘Why are not you dancing? Everyone seems to have decamped. And so early! It will not do.’

‘I am sure that this is merely a pause to draw breath, my lord,’ offers Margot with a smile. ‘Wait and see - come the waltz, the entire assembly will be vying for a place in the set.’

‘Then shall you agree to partner Lady Bloom, and help set an example for the rest?’ Turning to Hannibal, Lord Bloom confides, ‘I myself cannot abide a waltz, but I have no objection to my wife indulging herself from time to time.’

‘What is this, my lord?’ exclaims Lady Bloom, appearing suddenly behind her husband. ‘You have found me a new partner? How shocking!’

Lady Margot laughs, light and soft. ‘If you are of a mind to accept, my lady, then it shall be my pleasure to embrace that role, even if only for the duration of a dance.’

A singular look passes between Margot and Lady Bloom that inclines Hannibal towards the uneasy belief that his friend might be in need of a sympathetic ear. Long has he suspected her of partiality towards the countess; and given the whispers of Lord Bloom’s attachment to a certain dowager duchess, widowed a year since at the age of four-and-thirty, it seems likely that there is some basis for his speculation. For the present, however, there is nothing to be done. And so Hannibal returns his attention to the matter of his absent lover.

‘If you will excuse me, I shall return presently with Mr Graham.’

Hannibal takes up two glasses of ruby wine and threads his way through the crowd towards the terrace doors. The air outside is, indeed, most refreshing; the terrace, however, appears empty. Frowning, Hannibal walks to the stone balustrade, gaze searching the knot garden below. Torches have been set at intervals around its perimeter, glowing like fireflies in the hazy summer night, illuminating patterned beds of herbs and shrubs. At first, Hannibal can detect no sign of anyone - the criss-crossing paths appear empty. Then a voice rings out, fierce, low.

‘I shall not. Do not attempt to persuade me further.’

Will.

Realising that the sound is coming from almost directly below him, Hannibal sets down the wine glasses atop the balustrade railing and hurries to the nearest flight of steps. Once at ground level, he rounds the corner and comes to an abrupt halt. For there in the shadowed recess, a Roman soldier enfolds in his arms a sailor.

‘Wills, you little fool,’ mutters the soldier.

And in that utterance lies a wealth of pain, affection - and intimacy.

‘Not half so much as some,’ comes Will’s reply, muffled, for his face is pressed into the soldier’s armoured shoulder.

Perhaps Hannibal makes a noise of some sort, for in the next instant the soldier's head swings around, and narrowed blue eyes fix upon him in annoyance.

'Sir, you intrude.'

As the soldier takes a step forward, moonlight slants upon his face, and distantly Hannibal recognises him as the Viscount Grantham. The year above him at Oxford, Anthony Grantham had embarked on his Grand Tour of Europe several years since, to the personal dismay of at least a dozen fine ladies and gentlemen of the ton. And now here he is back again. Entwined with *Hannibal's* boy.

'I had heard that you were returned to England. But not that you had set about immediately seducing other people's lovers,' Hannibal bites out. 'Release Mr Graham immediately.'

'Hannibal, he is not -'

'Be quiet,' he rasps, the idea that Will's first thought is to *defend* the cad utterly unendurable. 'I was addressing Lord Grantham. All that I require of *you* is silence.'

On a pained gasp, Will pulls away from Grantham to stand, flushed and tearful, apart. His arms are wrapped now around himself, and despite everything that he has seen, Hannibal wants more than anything to go to him. His feet, however, seem incapable of moving.

'Lover?' Grantham's eyes fill with fury, and swiftly he rounds on Will. 'Is this true? Are you now whoring your way around Derbyshire after making hay all through the Season in London?'

'That will do,' Hannibal snarls. 'Will, come. We are leaving.'

'He is not a dog.' Grantham's glaring defense of the boy is almost as infuriating as his protective move towards him. 'Wills, I insist that you remain exactly where you are.'

'Enough, both of you! I cannot endure this!'

Will's anguished cry pierces the night, and in the next instant he has taken off at a run.

Finally, Hannibal is spurred into motion. With a muttered curse, he turns on his heel and strides off in pursuit of Will, abandoning Grantham to his glowering. Up the staircase, across the terrace, and back into the ballroom where a waltz has just commenced. Rage pulses through him - rage and a deep, deep hurt that ties his stomach in knots and threatens to strip away every carefully cultivated defence that he has spent the last ten years arming himself with.

He spies Will slipping through a side door, and smiles grimly. From previous visits, he knows that this particular door leads into a series of antechambers from which there is no other exit. When supper is called, the rooms will be filled with hungry guests. But for now they lie empty, the servants all fully occupied in preparing food and keeping up a steady supply of drinks to the ballroom.

It is in the fifth and final chamber that he finds Will, perched on the edge of a chaise longue, head buried in his hands. With the heel of his boot, Hannibal kicks shut the door, and he derives some mean satisfaction from Will's immediate start. The boy scrambles upright, wiping his face, eyes narrowed and resentful.

'I thought you were unwell. Lady Margot was concerned for you. *I* was concerned for you.' With a twist of his mouth that is utterly devoid of humour, Hannibal walks to the window. It overlooks vast fields, now black as pitch, the star-sprinkled sky above offering a dazzling counterpoint. 'I sought you out to bring you wine, to offer comfort.'

‘Wine?’ Will’s distracted gaze flicks to Hannibal’s empty hands.

‘But you were already in receipt of comfort.’ Hannibal folds his arms across his chest. ‘Of - revival.’

‘*No*.’

Swinging around, Hannibal directs at the boy a hard stare. ‘No? You were not taking comfort from Lord Grantham? It was an illusion, then?’

‘It was not that sort of comfort.’ Will’s chin juts mutinously. ‘Do not you know me at all, that you could suspect me of such a thing?’

‘I thought I did. I thought it a privilege that you had allowed me to know you.’ The knots in Hannibal’s stomach tighten. ‘But it was only one facet of the whole, was not it? Will the charming, Will the attentive, saying and doing whatever was required to secure his lover’s attentions.’ His lip curls. ‘And, perhaps, a title?’

‘How can you speak so to me?’ Will is on his feet now, twin spots of colour blazing in his pale face. ‘After all that we have shared?’

‘How can you stand before me and tell me that you are not intimately acquainted with Lord Grantham, *Wills*? Or have you merely fallen back into old habits, allowing a stranger to paw at you so?’

Will flinches. ‘Jealousy is making you spiteful, my lord. I have not said that I am not acquainted with him. Clearly I am. But *not* in the way that you are implying.’

Smarting from the insult, Hannibal strides towards Will and seizes him by the upper arms. ‘Then, by gods, tell me how. *Tell me*.’

‘Why should I?’ hisses Will, glaring up at him, every muscle tensed in outrage. ‘When only a few minutes ago you commanded me to silence? Commanded me! I am not your puppet, Count Lecter, formed to trot obediently at your side and follow your every command.’

‘*Every*?’ A harsh laugh is ripped from Hannibal’s throat. ‘At this moment, I would settle for *any*. If, that is, it was my habit to command you. Forgive me for thinking that we were on more equal terms than that.’

‘Oh really? If I were truly your equal, I do not believe that you would have spoken to me in such a way as you did tonight.’

Will’s eyes flood suddenly with tears, and with a vulgar oath Hannibal dips his head to fasten his mouth over his boy’s in rough, desperate claiming. Words are getting them nowhere. But this - *this* has always worked between them. He pulls Will hard against him, hands roaming in base possessiveness, cupping his bottom and lifting him to wrap slim legs around his waist. The unexpected revealing of white skin pulls from Hannibal another savage laugh, and he pushes the clinging boy back against the adjacent wall.

‘I see you went your own way as usual. You were determined to keep yourself bared, as I recall. Tell me,’ he sneers, wrapping a hand around Will’s cock, rubbing beneath the head until it is pulsing hard against his palm, ‘was this delightful surprise intended for me or for him?’

‘You must know that it was for you.’ It is a thready whisper. ‘Do not speak of him in those terms.’ Will’s fingers tighten on Hannibal's shoulders. ‘Do not speak of him at all. Hannibal, please, come

back to me.'

'Very well, then.'

He should end this now. With Will so stubbornly mute on the subject of Lord Grantham, and with his own heart blackened by the poison of suspicion and doubt, Hannibal should deposit the boy unceremoniously on the carpet and walk from the room. Instead, he thrusts two fingers into that quivering little mouth.

'Suck.'

Blue eyes are beseeching on his but Will obeys, cheeks hollowing, tongue laving Hannibal's fingers almost desperately. Pulling them away just as abruptly, Hannibal seeks the furled entrance that he has kissed in worship so many times. He works his fingers deep, finding Will still a little lax from their coupling that afternoon, traces of oil making the slide easier. He finds the hidden nub within, stroking it relentlessly, until Will is incoherent with glazed pleasure. His own cock rising in response to his lover's stuttered moans, Hannibal pulls it free of his breeches front fall. There is only their precome to slick the way, but it will have to be enough. He hitches Will higher, positions the head of his cock at his entrance, and without preamble thrusts upwards, burying himself to the hilt. Will's eyes are wide with shock and arousal; his mouth is open on a silent 'oh'. Hannibal crushes it beneath him own, tasting salt and despair, tongue invading and devouring, in feral mimicry of the hard fucking he is giving the boy. He wants to tear the clothes from Will's body, wants to mark every inch as *his*. With unsteady fingers, he pulls the wool shirt free of its cinching belt, pushing it up to bare his boy's pale chest, and leaves a trail of biting kisses from chin to delicate collarbone before latching onto a pink nipple. He sets both hands to Will's bottom, fingers fanning out, and snaps his hips up, fucking deeper still. Small hands are clenched in his hair; Hannibal feels every involuntary tug with a sense of primal satisfaction. He pulls off the nipple with a final graze of teeth. Will's eyes are heavy-lidded with want, breaths shuddering with every thick slide. Hannibal breaks the contact between them, pressing his face into Will's neck as he fucks up once, twice, and comes with a loud groan. Will's cries mingle with his own, a spreading wetness against Hannibal's stomach evidence of the boy's own spurting orgasm. For a few moments, they remain locked together, breathing heavily. Then, carefully, Hannibal withdraws and sets Will onto his feet. Immediately, Will sags back against the wall, eyes huge and dark, mouth kiss-stung. In a silence thick with tension, they each set their clothing to rights.

'What now?' Will's voice is tight with strain.

Hannibal spares him a reluctant glance - takes in the bowed head, the trembling mouth, slender fingers twisting together. A shadow of the lovely, vivacious thing he has come to love so desperately…

'Once and for all, will you tell me what Grantham is to you?'

Slowly, Will raises his head. 'I have told you that he is not my lover. Why is not that enough?'

'Why are you so determined that it must be?'

A mutinous firming of lips follows. 'Because I need to know that you trust me. That my word alone is sufficient.'

'You demand my trust while refusing to grant me the same privilege.' Hannibal's tone turns to ice. 'Am I to be tested on some absurd principle? I think not.'

If possible, Will grows paler still. 'Hannibal -'

‘This interview has ceased its usefulness.’ With deliberate cruelty, Hannibal turns his back. Pulling open the door, he says tersely, ‘We shall finish our evening and return to Lecter House. But from this moment, you may consider yourself released from our… *arrangement*. In the morning, I shall order your trunk packed and a carriage made ready to take you wherever you please.’

He does not look back or hesitate, even at the shocked gasp and stifled sobs that follow. He wants to tear the door from its hinges. Instead, he closes it behind him with a gentle click.

***

Almost as soon as he re-enters the ballroom, Hannibal is accosted by Margot and Mason.

‘Where have you been?’ Margot’s eyes are alight with speculation and worry. ‘Mason saw you tearing after poor Mr Graham and wanted to go after you, but I persuaded him that you were better left to yourselves. What on earth has happened?’

‘Steady on, Meg.’ Mason steps up, brow furrowed in concern. ‘Lecter, are you unwell?’

‘I hardly know,’ mutters Hannibal. Then, hastily, ‘No, no. I am quite well. It is just so damnedly hot in here.’

‘I am sure that they will call supper soon,’ offers Margot in reassurance. ‘How is Mr Graham?’

Hannibal turns from his friends’ perceptive gazes. ‘He was feeling faint but he is quite alright now. I left him to rest a little longer.’

The announcement of a final dance before supper is just the distraction that Hannibal needs. With Mason claimed by a smouldering bandit, and Margot by a Tudor queen, Hannibal heads for the nearest refreshment table. He pours punch brimful into a glass and downs half of it in one large swallow. Scanning the room, he can see no sign of Lord Grantham. Just as well, for he is half-determined that he will knock the fellow out, should their paths cross again.

The side door opens and Will emerges, red-eyed and wan. Hannibal’s fingers tighten around his glass as he fights the terrible urge to go to him - to take the boy into his arms and kiss away the awful lines of unhappiness that he knows he is responsible for. But then what of *Will’s* responsibility? What of his refusal to trust Hannibal even as he had demanded trust for himself? No. He must stand firm, no matter the personal cost. Resolved anew, Hannibal waits for the moment Will will see him, determined to cut the boy in consequence.

But Will seems altogether preoccupied with staring into the crowd, and Hannibal watches with narrowed eyes as the boy shakes his head, words forming on his lips that Hannibal cannot decipher. Straight black brows draw together, and in the next moment Will has whipped around, fleet of foot as ever, darting out through the open archway beneath which they had first entered, and back down the corridor that leads to the front entrance.

He should let him go. He should not care why Will has fled. He should not feel a curl of worry in his belly at the prospect of the boy being alone out there in the darkness. He should -

‘*Damnation*.’

Draining his glass, Hannibal sets it down so forcefully, the table shakes. Without sparing a glance for anyone who might have witnessed his display of temper and wondered at it, he sets off once again after Will, adrenaline spurring him almost into a run. Boots thudding on carpet, ringing on stone,

through the empty entrance hall, and clattering finally down the main steps. He stops at the bottom, allowing his eyes to grow accustomed to the velvet darkness. Carriages line the circular driveway, their cabs empty, the drivers having no doubt installed themselves in the servants' quarters to await their masters' calls.

At first he can discern no other movement save the horses which stand patiently at the head of each carriage, most occupied with feeding bags bursting with fresh hay, some grazing at the grass verges. Then Hannibal spots a slight figure trudging up the long avenue towards the road, and swearing anew he tears off in pursuit. He has all but caught up to the boy when Will stiffens, stops, and swings about, his graceful form tensed as if the merest provocation will have him running again.

'Where in *hell* do you think you are going?' roars Hannibal, frustration and unhappiness boiling over. 'Did you think to *walk* home, with no thought for the danger you would be putting yourself in?'

'Home?' A bitter laugh escapes Will, such as Hannibal has never heard, and it chills him through. 'Have you forgotten already, my lord? Lecter House is my home no longer.' And, on a sob, 'I have no home.'

'Do you think me so unfeeling that I would put you out onto the street?' Jaw clenching, Hannibal surveys the boy, tensing once again against the instinct to touch him, to soothe and offer comfort. 'I had thought that you might go to Grantham.' It almost chokes him to say it.

Dully, Will says, 'Then you do not believe me after all.'

'I did not say that.' Hannibal speaks more sharply than he had intended, and it pains him to see Will flinch from his words. 'Gods, Will, what do you want of me? If you say that he is not your lover - has never been such - then yes, I believe you. But clearly he is *something* to you - something important - yet you refuse to tell me what.'

'And for that you would send me away?' Blue eyes flash fire. 'What a very slight sort of feeling you must have had for me, that you can cast me off so easily.' And with a toss of his head, off he marches again.

'Easily?' breathes Hannibal through lips suddenly bloodless. Striding forward, he grabs Will and swings him around. 'Do you think that it does not *rend me in two* to part with you? Have you really so little idea of how much you mean to me?'

'Hannibal.' On a sob, Will drops his head forward, pressing the crown against Hannibal's chest.

Hesitating but a moment, Hannibal buries his fingers in the thick curls, stroking rhythmically, his heart shattering just a little bit more at the thought that this may be the last time he ever touches his boy.

Will's slender arms come up to wrap about his waist, and unable to resist, Hannibal presses a kiss to the top of his head.

'Take your hands off my son!'

Hannibal's head jerks up, arms closing automatically around Will. Approaching them at a furious pace is the black-clad highwayman whom Hannibal had first noticed speaking with Lord and Lady Bloom in the entrance hall.

'Did not you hear me? I said *unhand my son*, sir!'

In the event, it is Will who pulls free, chin trembling even as his eyes shoot defiance at the interloper. ‘What do you want?’

Pulling off his tricorn and tugging down the black neckerchief that had concealed the lower portion of his face, the highwayman is revealed in all of his glowering splendour.

‘Lord Wolfram?’ Incredulous, Hannibal looks from one to the other. ‘The Earl of Wolfram is *your father*?’

Indeed, it seems all too horribly likely, for both are possessed of the same blue eyes, straight brows, and wildly curling hair, although the earl’s is peppered liberally with grey. And suddenly, it all falls into place.

‘Then Lord Grantham -’

‘Is my brother,’ confirms Will miserably.

Ignoring Hannibal, Lord Wolfram takes a step towards Will, who immediately takes two steps backwards.

‘Son,’ and there is pleading in his gruff voice, ‘I want you to come home. It is time.’

‘Why?’ Will’s voice is high and tight. ‘*You* shall not be there. For two years you have been conspicuous by your absence, and last December I discovered the reason why.’

‘I know that I have caused you distress,’ comes the pained admission, ‘but whatever account you have been given of the circumstances, I warrant it is a false one. Besides, it is all over now.’

‘Really?’ Disbelief is rife in Will’s voice. ‘Yet I hear that you have moved the family up to Derbyshire, while you continue to spend your time in Bath.’

‘No, Will.’ Lord Wolfram shakes his head emphatically. ‘Fangen Hall is to be Anthony’s seat. Your mother remains at Bath, where I shall be returning shortly.’

‘How convenient,’ spits Will. ‘Then nothing is over, is it? You may continue to pay court at Russell Street and leave the rest of us to the speculation of good society.’

‘Russell Street?’ Lord Wolfram is now deathly pale. He casts a wary glance at Hannibal. ‘Will, come along with me, that we may continue this discussion out of the hearing of strangers.’

‘The count is no stranger,’ fires back Will. ‘He is -’ He falters for an instant before continuing fiercely, ‘He has the right to hear this. And if you fear for your precious reputation, I can tell you that there are no safer hands to leave it in than his.’

‘Very well,’ sighs his father. ‘Since you leave me with no alternative. But tell me, Will, who has been speaking to you of Russell Street?’

‘A fellow student, whose parents paid a visit to Eton at Christmas, bestowing basketfuls of presents and a veritable treasure trove of gossip acquired from their month-long stay at Bath.’ In bitter tones, Will reveals, ‘One particularly salacious rumour involved a certain Lord Wolfram who was more often to be found spending his nights with a Mr Gideon of Russell Street than accompanying his wife out in society.’

‘And that is why you ran away? Oh, son.’ Lord Wolfram shakes his head, brows drawn together. ‘It is my fault. I should not have attempted to conceal the truth from my children. Your mother has always known it, for relying on her generous nature I told her all.’

‘Told her what?’ clips Will. ‘That you and this Mr Gideon are lovers?’

'Will, no. Mr Gideon - Abel - was my half-brother.’

‘What? But - how?’ Will’s eyes are now wide as saucers. ‘I thought that you had no siblings.’

‘My mother bore a child when she was but fifteen,’ comes the startling revelation. ‘Her parents had the boy adopted by a respectable couple, the Gideons, who moved shortly thereafter to Kent. Mr Gideon returned to Bath two years ago on account of his poor health, and immediately made himself known to me. I had always known of his existence but had kept the family’s secret for the sake of my mother, who was so very dear to me. We saw no reason to make public so delicate an affair, and so I visited my brother - who was bed-bound - nightly at his lodgings. I see now,’ adds Lord Wolfram grimly, ‘that people are wont to draw the worst conclusions for their own entertainment.’

‘Was?’ Will’s voice is very small. ‘You have twice now referred to Mr Gideon in the past tense.’

‘He is dead, Will.’ A broken sound leaves the earl’s lips. ‘My brother died a month since.’

‘I -’

For the first time since Lord Wolfram’s unmasking, Will turns to Hannibal. He looks for a moment entirely lost, and how easy it would be for Hannibal to take him into his arms and forget everything except the softness and warmth of his boy. Except that Will has lied to him from the first. And with a chill, Hannibal knows what he must do.

‘Lord Wolfram, I must beg your indulgence to please return to the house.’

‘Really, I hardly think -’

‘Your *son*,’ says Hannibal with grim emphasis, ‘shall join you there presently. I give you my word that nothing improper shall pass between us. I wish only to take my leave of him.’

‘See that is all you do. I have heard an account of your impropriety towards my boy that has shocked me exceedingly.’ The earl’s parting glance is positively glacial, but it softens as he addresses Will. ‘Anthony and I shall wait for you inside.’

A weighty silence follows his departure. Will stands, hands twisting together, almost fearful as he watches Hannibal.

‘I forget sometimes how very young you are,’ says Hannibal softly.

Instantly, Will scowls. ‘I shall not go with him.’

‘Yes.’ Hannibal holds his gaze implacably. ‘You shall. For it seems that your father has judged me - not without cause - as something of a corruptor.’

‘I shall tell him the truth of it,’ protests Will.

‘I hardly think the truth will encourage him to think more kindly of me,’ says Hannibal dryly. He shakes his head. ‘It is time that you took your proper place, Mr *Grantham*.’

Will has at least the grace to blush. ‘It was not a complete fabrication. Graham is my mother’s family name.’

A lick of anger takes hold at this apparent shrugging off.

‘Not a complete fabrication? You allowed me to believe that you were a rootless outcast, belonging nowhere, dependent entirely on the charity of strangers.’ Voice hardening, Hannibal levels at Will a look of searing condemnation. ‘Without compunction, you have deceived me and withheld from me. After all the time that we have spent together, I find I do not know you at all.’

The colour drains from Will’s face. ‘You *do* know me. Better than anyone else in the world. And you must - surely you must - know how I feel about you. Yes, I lied, but only because I did not want to risk losing you, for I knew that the truth would have compelled you to send me back to my father's house.'

'Perhaps. Or perhaps I might have respected *your* wishes - put *your* needs ahead of every other consideration. What a pity you never thought to ask.'

'I am asking now.'

Hannibal turns from Will’s pleading expression. 'Now? It is too little, too late.’

‘No.’ Voice cracking, Will takes a step towards him. ‘It cannot be. Hannibal, I love you.’

And oh, how it hurts to hear it, to retreat again just out of his boy’s grasp.

‘Calf-love.’ The deliberately cold dismissal brings tears to Will’s eyes, and Hannibal steels himself against them. ‘The fancy of a child who *wants* constantly, yet who has yet to learn to *give* in return. Go home, Will. Go home and grow up.’

‘But -’ Will is now visibly distraught. ‘*You* are my home. Hannibal, please. I know that you love me as I love you.’

A hand grasps his sleeve. Hannibal looks down at it, jaw working. ‘I used to watch my parents play out such scenes as this. My mother would come home, chastened, after another of her adventures; she would plead for my father’s forbearance, swear her abiding love; and because of his guilt over Violet, he would forgive her. A few months would pass, and inevitably Mama would grow restless again. So off she would go, and all would play out as before.’ He sighs harshly. ‘Whether or not I love you is immaterial, do not you see? I am tired of games, Will. Tired of fickleness and inconstancy in those whom I -’ He rakes a hand through his hair. ‘Go back to your family. I am done.’

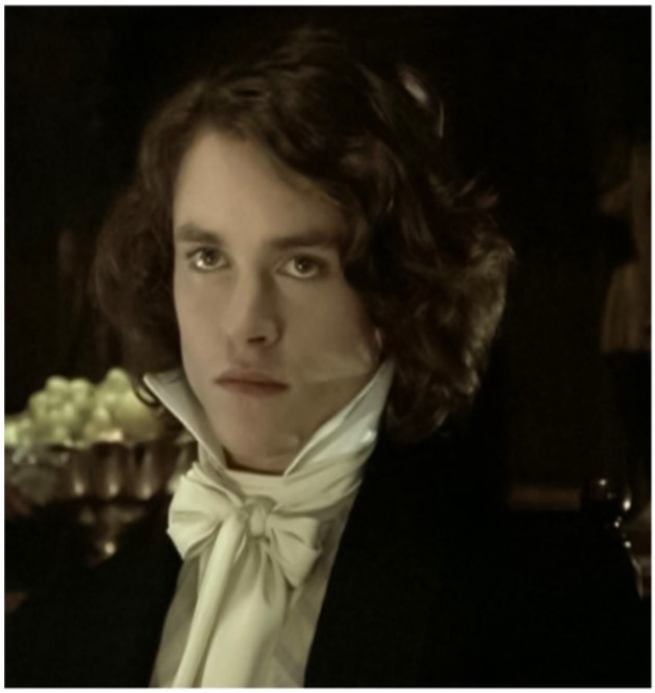
His voice almost breaks on the final word, but it is enough. With one final devastated look, Will releases him and, on a rending sob, breaks into a run back towards the house.

Hardly aware of what he is about, Hannibal blunders off the path and into an adjacent field. He sits down heavily in the grass, legs giving way even as he allows silent tears to stream, unchecked, down his face. And there in the shadows he waits, mired in misery, until he has heard more than one carriage rattle past. Only when he is certain that he has allowed Will and the Granthams ample time to take their leave does he rise, sore of heart, to make his own way back to the house and call for his carriage.

It is over, entirely over. Yet far too late for him to have escaped unscathed. For as surely as Hannibal is convinced that he has done what he must to restore Will to his family and stem the hemorrhaging of

his own heart, he knows too that it has come at a terrible cost. He has lost his own, his dearest, his darling. Never again will he wrap Will in his arms, or taste the softness of his lips, or delight in the sweetness of his voice. And as he steps into the carriage which is to take him even further from his boy, Hannibal wonders bleakly whether he will ever know peace of mind again.

Caught unawares



‘The rain has eased at last.’ Eagerly, Will turns from the window. ‘Perhaps it might be dry enough to venture a walk in an hour or so, Mama.’

‘Let us hope so.’ From the sofa, his mother looks up from her needlepoint, an indulgent smile warming her softly rounded features. ‘I fear that you might otherwise wear a hole in the carpet with all that pacing.’

‘Well, we have been shut up indoors for three whole days,’ he reasons, squirming a little at his own transparency.

It is difficult to contain his impatience, yet Will knows that he must take care not to arouse his parents’ suspicions. For almost eight months, he has eschewed all attempts to reintroduce him into society, preferring instead the company of his books and his sketchpad. The former he has added to in breadth of choice and quality with frequent trips to his favourite antiquarian bookseller just off Catharine Place, guided by the advice of his new (and infinitely superior to the last) tutor. As for the latter, he has filled page after page with images of the same subject: piercing eyes of rich amber, fair brows, sculpted lips, a sweep of tawny hair. Over and over, most of the renderings hopelessly tear-smudged, all borne out of a desperate and ultimately fruitless attempt to exorcise the original from his mind - and his heart.

His sole consolation has been his regular correspondence with Boarham Hall. Or, more precisely, with Lady Margot. Only a few weeks after his return to Bath, the first letter had arrived, and with it a sliver of sunshine in the grey of his new life. Words of consolation, of understanding. And a gentle caution to have patience.

For I cannot believe that two people so perfectly attuned shall not, in time, find each other again.

Still, with the passing of each new month, Will’s once-fervent desire for reconciliation has dwindled to a forlorn wish that he knows is unlikely to be fulfilled. The best that he hopes for now is to be able to spend time again with those who know Hannibal best. A clutch for closeness in absentia. And his opportunity is at hand with Lady Margot’s latest revelation that the Vergers are to pass the spring at Bath.

Mama’s health was so much improved after our parents’ last trip, she is quite determined that we must all now be exposed to Bath’s rejuvenating properties! In any case, it has been too quiet in Derbyshire with so many of our friends gone up to London. And what exciting things we hear of Bath! Is it true that there are balls at the Assembly Rooms twice a week? Mason and I shall be sure to attend every one; and if we may also be assured of the pleasure of your *company, dear Will, then our happiness shall be complete indeed.*

Lady Margot’s familiarity in addressing Will by his given name has been oddly comforting, a reminder that the few months he had passed in Derbyshire had not been some fever dream, but real and remembered. At least by a few.

Whether Hannibal is one of those unnamed friends currently residing in London, Will can only guess. By tacit agreement, they have discussed him but rarely. To do otherwise would have seemed somehow a trespass on his privacy, and Will trusts that Lady Margot will take care to prepare him well in advance of any public announcement that might someday be made about the count and his affairs. Yet, as the first anniversary of their meeting at Quant's grows ever closer, he finds himself dwelling more and more on their tumultuous early encounters. What a fog of seething resentment he had existed in when first he had left Eton for London. How reckless had been his behaviour. A determination to hurt his father at almost the cost of his soul. And then, a rebirth of sorts in the beauty and wildness of Derbyshire. And an attachment so strong, it has haunted him through all the days since...

‘There is to be a concert in the Upper Rooms Wednesday next,’ comments his mother. ‘Bach. You know how fond your father is of his work. We thought that perhaps you might join us.’

‘Perhaps.’

While it is true that much progress has been made between them in the ensuing months, Will has yet to feel entirely comfortable in his parents' presence. His wretchedness at the terrible injustice he had done his father has been a source of much internal distress. And somehow, the love and endless patience which they have shown him in return has served only to make his discomfiture worse.

'And, of course, on Monday there is the dress ball.'

At this, Will's ears prick up. For if the Vergers should arrive within the next few days, they will surely make that their social debut. The balls held at the Upper Rooms are famed across the country, and attendance is almost compulsory if one is to be considered truly fashionable in Bath.

Matching his mother's casualness, he says, 'I suppose that it would not be the worst way to spend a Monday evening.'

***

By Monday evening, however, Will's nerves are stretched to singing. For despite having walked out every afternoon for three days straight, he has failed to secure so much as a glimpse of the Vergers.

His valet dismissed, he stands before the mirror in his bedchamber, twisting and turning this way and that. His hair is a trifle overlong, the ends still curling stubbornly where they brush the collar of his coat, and he wishes belatedly that he had thought to get a haircut before exposing himself to the censorious collective gaze of high society.

With a resigned huff, he pulls on white kid gloves, admiring again the new coat of peacock blue that his father's tailor had delivered only that morning. Against breeches and stockings of snowy white, it contrasts splendidly, and he slips his feet into heeled black shoes with a sense of growing satisfaction. Should the Vergers indeed be present tonight, they will be able to carry back to Derbyshire a flattering enough report.

'Will, are you coming?' His mother's voice floats up from the foot of the staircase. 'The carriage is ready and your father is starting to pace.'

'Thank you, Maud,' comes the dry rejoinder. And, more loudly, 'Come, young sir, allow your mother and I to take you and show you off, eh?'

'Coming.'

Heart lighter than it has been in months, Will hurries from his chamber and clatters down the stairs. And makes a wish beneath his breath that tonight, at last, will see him reunited with his friends.

***

They alight from their carriage before the distinctive limestone porticoed entrance to the Upper Rooms. The persistent March rains have given way at last to more clement weather, and the evening air is fresh with the scent of cherry blossom. Although the hour is yet early, guests trickle steadily through the open doors. Some repair directly to the card room, a pleasant space of octagonal design situated between the tea room and the ballroom. But the object of most is to secure seats in the long ballroom, where the orchestra plays from a domed gallery, and five magnificent chandeliers hang overhead, two hundred candles casting constantly flickering shadows upon the lofty ceiling - and a flattering glow upon the painted, primped, bejewelled patrons below.

Will's parents are greeted from left and right, while he is acknowledged with reserved nods and rapacious curiosity. For the most part, he bears the attention with patience, although a couple of bold stares are met with pointed glares.

'Never mind,' comforts his mother, seeing his discomfort after the third such encounter. 'The more you are seen out in society, the less of a novelty you will be, my dear.'

Privately, Will suspects that the attention he is receiving has less to do with novelty than with notoriety, but there seems little point in airing these fears. More than one face has seemed rather awfully familiar, an inevitability given that fashionable society is to be found almost as often in Bath as in London. Still, his parents' status offers him a measure of protection; and as he has no interest in being courted, the censure of a few hypocritical aristocrats matters little to him.

His parents being detained in conversation by old acquaintances - a viscount and his husband - Will slips free to explore alone. The ballroom is filling steadily now, the first dance having been called, and presently he is heralded by Peter Bernard, one of his more mischievous fellow Etonians. His short brown hair is brushed forward in the fashionable Caesar style, and his lightly freckled face is stretched in a permanent grin.

'It is good to see you again, Grantham. School has been such a bore without you. Care to dance the first with me?'

'Certainly, although I may need instruction in some of the newer steps. It has been a while.' Grinning, Will places his hand within Peter's and accompanies him to the end of the line, which stretches almost the length of the room. 'Goodness, how quickly the floor has filled!'

'Oh, one has to be quick about it in Bath,' laughs Peter. 'Everyone who is anyone attends the dress balls. So securing a place in a set can be a regular scramble.'

'Do you spend every vacation in Bath?'

'Yes, worse luck.' Peter pulls a face. 'Papa will not even consider putting up in London or Brighton - he thinks them dens of degeneracy. Still, with you here, the Easter vacation will be much more interesting. I have almost full a fortnight before I must return to Eton.' His eyes are speculative on Will's face. 'I confess, I had almost given up hope of seeing you out again in society. You have turned into quite the hermit since - well, since your return. I had thought at first that you might come back to school for the final year.'

Flushing, Will admits, 'I could not face it. Besides, my mother would not hear of parting with me again so soon. I think she was worried that I might run off again. But I have now an excellent tutor and I am content to finish my education at home.'

'And then?'

Eyes clouding, Will shakes his head. The future is not a subject upon which he is eager to dwell. 'I am not sure. But what of you? Is it to be Oxford or Cambridge?'

'Neither.' Peter shudders. 'Five years under the whip is quite enough for me. I am for the continent in September. A few years of learning the Old Masters will be just the thing.'

As the dance proceeds, conversation gives way to intricate turns and energetic footwork. And a change of partners: once, twice, thrice. Weaving between the rows, Will finds to his dismay that not every dancer is as sure-footed as Peter, although the antics of one particular fellow - a tall parson with

absolutely no sense of rhythm - threaten to reduce him to helpless giggles. Catching Peter's eye after a second near-miss involving the parson's heels and his own already sore toes, Will mouths an expressive oath and spins away, out of kilter suddenly with the rest of the line. He is saved from tipping over by a firm grip on his shoulders, and the apology on his lips dies as he raises laughing eyes to his saviour and finds himself face to face with Hannibal Lecter.

Dizziness strikes with blinding force and darkness threatens, encroaching on the edges of Will's vision. The gloved hands on his shoulders tighten momentarily before he is released, and he backs away, eyes wide, heart thundering.

It is him, it is. Clad in forbidding black. Eyes of burning amber. A little thinner, a good deal paler, but him nonetheless. Hannibal. *Hannibal*.

'Mr Grantham.'

A curt bow and suddenly Will is alone again, confused, aching, almost in a stupor as he watches his lover's retreat.

But he is not yours, is he? Not any more.

Before he has time to do more than take a few shuddering breaths, Will is yanked back into the fray by an impatient Peter. He completes the dance by rote, caught in a fever of expectation, almost ruthless in his refusal to be drawn back into conversation. The words would be ashes on his tongue. Nothing matters now, nothing - except finding Hannibal again, or the Vergers, and demanding to know the meaning of Hannibal's presence here. Surely it cannot be without design of seeing *him*. And yet… A seed of doubt torments, insidious. Why, then, having found him, would Hannibal have walked away?

The dance ends at last. Will mumbles words of apology to a nonplussed Peter and breaks away, eyes darting about in desperate seeking. He is halfway up the room when a waving fan captures his attention. It is Lady Margot, charming in white muslin, black ringlets clustered at her temples. Will manages a wavering smile and makes his way through the crowd towards her.

'Will, dear Will,' she cries, taking his hands and spreading them apart. 'Let me look at you!' And then, softly, 'Oh, my dear, you have seen him. I am sorry. I should have come to call on you when we arrived yesterday, but Mason urged caution. We were not sure of our reception, you see.' And, at Will's pained look, 'Not from you, but -'

'My parents.' Will nods, attention still divided. 'You must not fear their disapprobation. That is saved for,' he swallows, 'others.' He takes a shuddering breath. 'Yes, I have seen him. Why is he here?'

'Well, now. There is what he has told us, and then there is the other, more likely reason.' Gently, Lady Margot pulls Will down to sit beside her on a pastel pink loveseat. 'Mason is off finding drinks in the tea room, so you may take his place. I think you must.'

'I am fine,' mutters Will.

Lady Margot looks at him wryly. 'You are many things, my young friend, but at this moment *fine* is not one of them.'

'Why is he here?' repeats Will, desperation edging his voice. 'What has he told you?'

She sighs. ‘That he wishes to take the waters, see the antiquities, and satisfy himself that you are well. That once he has done so, he shall depart Bath for London and the business of Parliament.’

‘Oh.’ A terrible bleakness threatens to overwhelm him. ‘Then I am a duty to be performed; a task to be checked off.’

‘You are a great deal more than that.’ Fervency colours Lady Margot’s tone. ‘You are his world, Will. Without you, he has been a mere shadow of his former self. We have all remarked on it! And were not he so stubborn, he would admit that *that* is his real reason for coming.’

As much as Will longs to believe such an extravagant claim, all too fresh is the memory of a censorious stare and hands thrusting him away.

‘I will own that in Derbyshire his tenderness was real. But he looked at me just now as if I were the very last person he wanted to see.’

‘Or expected to see?’ Lady Margot’s hand covers his. ‘I daresay you were both caught unawares.’

‘Dear me. What have I missed?’ Mason, juggling three glasses with a look of intense concentration, appears from a gap in the mêlée as people jostle for places in the next dance. ‘It is good to see you again, Graham - or should we call you Grantham now?’

There is no malice in Mason’s tone but Will shifts uncomfortably just the same.

‘It is good to see you, too. Here, allow me.’ He stands, taking the nearest glass and passing it to Lady Margot.

‘Thank you, dear boy. And Mason, of course he is Grantham! Although it would be simplest if you followed my example and called him Will.’ Flashing Will a rather shamefaced look, she adds hastily, ‘If you do not mind, that is.’

‘I do not mind at all. In fact, I would like it very much,’ Will hastens to reassure her, for which he receives a dazzling smile.

‘Then Will it is.’ Mason thrusts a glass at him. ‘This was for, er - well, anyway, you look as if you need it more.’

Tasting the sweet ratafia, Will nods in gratitude. ‘It is quite reviving. Thank you, Lord Verger.’

With a wave of his hand, Mason declares, ‘We must have an end to all of this *Lord* business. We know each other well enough now, dear fellow. It is just Verger, you hear? And now tell me, who exactly has been caught unawares?’

But Lady Margot’s eyes have widened in warning, and with a hammering pulse Will turns to see Hannibal making his way towards them, glass of wine in hand, mouth set in a grim line.

‘See who we have found.’ With determined cheer, Lady Margot greets him while slipping a comforting arm through Will’s.

‘I do see.’ As he takes a generous swallow of wine, Hannibal studies Will in insolent fashion. ‘Have you lost your friend, Mr Grantham?’

‘My friend?’ Uncomprehending for a moment, Will recalls the dance. Of course. Hannibal must have seen him with Peter. ‘If you mean Mr Bernard, then no.’

A mocking brow is raised. ‘Are you sure?’

Baffled by the turn of conversation, Will frowns. ‘Quite sure. As I have no claim over him, I cannot very well have lost him.’

Across the room he spots his parents, thankfully still wholly occupied. As a precaution, however, he shifts so that Mason blocks his line of sight.

‘Grantham, there you are!’

As Peter bursts upon them, Will feels Hannibal’s taunting gaze and grits his teeth.

‘What is it?’

‘I am trying to make a four for Whist. Shall you join us?’

Peter’s lack of manners aside, Will is in no mood for card games.

‘Thank you for the offer but I am occupied just now. Perhaps later.’

‘Oh, certainly. No matter. Well, another time, then.’

As Peter departs, looking rather crestfallen, Will drains his glass and tries not to gag.

‘No, no, my dear.’ Lady Margot raises her eyes heavenward. ‘Another one who insists on downing his drinks as if there is no tomorrow. Gentlemen,’ addressing Will and Hannibal simultaneously, ‘I insist that you stop dancing around each other and engage in a proper, *civilised* conversation. Mason and I shall be in the tea room.’

‘We shall?’ Bemused, Mason shrugs. ‘Oh, very well.’ And, to Hannibal, ‘Try not to be a complete bear. You did come all this way to see him, after all.’

A tense silence follows the Vergers’ departure.

‘You look well.’ As compliments go, it is hardly the most effusive, but at least they have stopped sniping at each other. ‘Your hair -’

‘It has grown.’ Self-consciously, Will reaches up to smooth a stray curl behind his ear.

‘Indeed.’ Hannibal’s tone is unreadable.

‘I shall probably have it cut tomorrow. Short,’ adds Will, a trifle unnecessarily.

‘Really?’ Now a measure of disapproval has crept in. ‘Not too short, I hope.’

‘Whyever not? I think it is past time.’Will jerks his chin up, defensive. ‘I am not a boy any more.’

Go home, Will. Go home and grow up.

The humiliation of that scathing command, uttered so many months ago, stings anew.

‘No, you are all of eighteen now.’

The mocking observation sparks fresh anger as Will recalls his last birthday. The ache that he had felt through all of that wretched day, for this man. This man, who had not written, who had allowed the

occasion to pass entirely unacknowledged.

‘Why did you have to come here?’ The words burst from him, bitter, resentful.

Hannibal’s head rears back as if he has been struck. ‘Forgive me,’ he snaps. ‘I did not realise that you had claimed ownership of the whole of Bath. Perhaps if I provide you with a list of my planned excursions, you will be satisfied. For then you can be sure to keep out of my way.’

‘That may be a trifle difficult, given that one of your *planned excursions* was apparently to see me.’ Will cocks a challenging brow. ‘Or is Lady Margot mistaken in the belief that you wished to enquire after my health?’

‘Not at all.’ Hannibal returns his stare with a chilling detachment. ‘But since you are here now in front of me looking perfectly well, I can consider that particular commission fulfilled, would not you say?’

Petty triumph dies as hopelessness clutches hard. To Will’s horror, his eyes fill with tears, and quickly he turns his head away. He cannot trust himself to speak, and so he executes a clumsy bow in Hannibal’s general direction before brushing past him and heading back blindly into the fray. He hardly knows where he is going, but within moments he is intercepted by his mother, who sets a concerned hand to his forehead.

‘Will, my dear, whatever is the matter? You are so very flushed. Are you ill?’

‘I am well,’ he protests. ‘It is nothing, Mama. Only - the air in here is a little oppressive. I thought that I might walk home, if you have no objection.’

‘I daresay you are unused to crowds after so long shut up at home,’ she says gently. ‘Of course you may return home. Do you wish me to call for the carriage?’

‘No, indeed. The walk will do me good. Pray make my excuses to Papa.’

Leaving his mother with a comforting squeeze of her gloved hand, Will is almost at the exit when he is accosted by Lady Margot and Mason.

‘Oh no. What has he done?’ Expression fierce, Lady Margot looks over Will’s shoulder. ‘Where is he? Count or not, I shall cosh him for upsetting you!’

‘No, I pray you, leave him. There is nothing the matter with me,’ says Will weakly. ‘I am only a little fatigued.’

‘You are being far too polite,’ frowns Lady Margot. ‘Tell us what we can do to make amends. It is we who brought him here, after all.’ With a glare at her brother.

‘There is nothing to make amends for, truly. But I am going to take my leave. It is for the best,’ insists Will, when Lady Margot looks ready to issue a fresh objection. ‘If my father were to see His Lordship and I together…’

‘Oh, very well. But say that you will meet us tomorrow at the Pump Room. Please? It shall be only Mason and myself, I promise.’

Lady Margot appears so crestfallen, Will cannot help but nod his assent.

‘Twelve o’clock,’ she says, brightening. ‘And should *His Lordship* dare to show his face, then I shall cosh him after all.’

***

‘It seems that I have fallen out of Lady Margot’s good graces.’

The sardonic drawl stops Will in his tracks. Halfway down Bennett Street he whirls around, heart thumping at the sight of Hannibal looming over him in the hazy half-darkness.

‘Your presence is unwelcome, sir,’ he chokes. ‘I beg you will excuse me.’

‘To do what? Walk home unaccompanied in the pitch dark?’ With a brooding stare, Hannibal reaches out and cups Will’s jaw, gloved thumb stroking over one flushed cheekbone. ‘Such a morsel would surely be devoured whole by the first ruffian who decided to try his luck.’

Jerking free, Will steps back. ‘Oh, but I would be safe with you?’ he jeers.

A bleak look crosses Hannibal’s noble features. ‘Once that would not have been in question.’

‘Once I thought that you -’ Drawing a harsh breath, Will shakes his head. ‘Never mind. Pray let me pass.’

‘And if I cannot?’

‘I do not understand you.’ Will’s voice is tight with emotion held barely in check. ‘At the Assembly Rooms you seemed desirous only of my absence. Last summer you all but told me that you were tired of me. That you wished me gone from your sight, from your life. You sent me away, Hannibal.’ His bottom lip begins to tremble. ‘You sent me away.’ Pain, unexpected and searing as a lash, doubles him over. ‘You sent me away,’ he sobs.

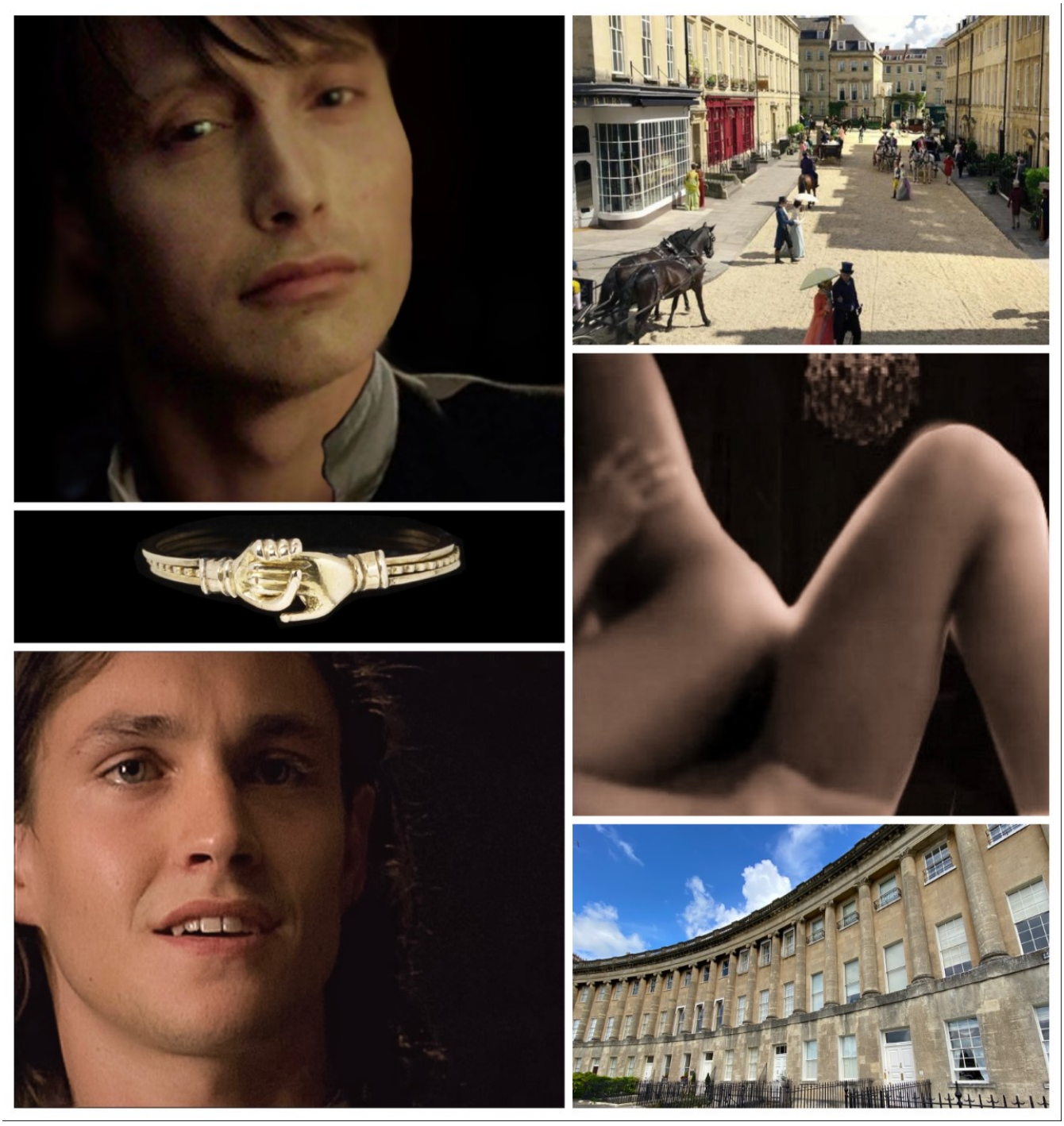
On a strangled oath, Hannibal steps forward and catches hold of him. And Will clings fiercely, turning his face into Hannibal’s coat, greedy despite himself for the comforting, familiar scent of the body that he knows as intimately as his own, surrendering to keening need as the tears flow, uncontrolled. A gentle hand strokes his hair as he is held and rocked. Until eventually the fog of misery lifts and Will begins to pull away. He is released at once, regarded by wary eyes as he straightens up and swipes at damp lashes with the heel of his hand.

‘I am going home,’ he says hoarsely. ‘Go back to your friends, my lord. You are not wanted here.’

Courtship

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes



For a moment, Hannibal considers doing as Will has bid him, but the idea of leaving him alone like this - pale, trembling, entirely vulnerable - is unthinkable.

‘I shall return to *our* friends when I have seen you home.’ His tone brooks no refusal but he can see by the firming of Will’s mouth that the boy is considering further protest anyway. To preempt it, he

says quietly, ‘We need not talk. You may ignore me altogether if you wish. But I *shall* see you safely to your door.’

On a frustrated huff, Will turns and resumes walking. At first Hannibal stays a few feet behind him, but gradually they fall into step, and three streets later Will finally speaks again.

‘How do you like Bath?’

Ah, a stab at politeness.

‘I arrived only this afternoon,’ Hannibal replies evenly, ‘and so I have yet to see much beyond my lodgings and the Upper Rooms. It seems a fine enough town.’

‘Where are you staying?’

‘Number one, Royal Crescent.’

Will makes a noise that sounds suspiciously like a snort. As insulting as it is undoubtedly intended to be, Hannibal finds himself warmed by this small sign of his boy’s rallying.

His boy. Does he have the right even to think of Will as such after his cruel behaviour in Derbyshire? The memory of their last moments together - Will’s pleading, his own implacable denials - fills Hannibal with shame, and all at once he is seized by the urge to speak his heart, even at the risk of repudiation.

‘I know I said that I would stay out of your way. Yet I must tell you that I have thought of you constantly since our parting last July.’ He darts a glance sideways. ‘Thought of you and - missed you, greatly.’

Will stiffens. ‘Really?’ His tone is clipped. ‘I would not have suspected such, given that the only communications I have received from Derbyshire have come from Boarham Hall.’

‘I did write,’ counters Hannibal softly. ‘A dozen letters. But I could not send them - did not know even how to finish them.’

All composed in an urgent hand - all ripped apart in frustration and consigned to flames. Letters of conciliation, of explanation, of apology, of love…

‘You could not have tried very hard, I think,’ is Will’s scowling observation. ‘You had, after all, above seven months in which to practise.’ Then, briskly, ‘It is of little matter now, my lord.’

‘Why is that?’

A recollection of Will’s laughing countenance as he had danced with the freckle-faced boy provokes a fresh pang of jealousy, and Hannibal is seized by the terrible fear that he is too late. Yet had not he known that this was the risk when he had made the decision to come to Bath? The possibility that his rejection of Will had been all too effective, succeeding in curing his lover of his attachment, thus leaving his young heart ready to be claimed by another?

‘Because, as you said to me not half an hour since, I am *perfectly well*,’ Will reminds him acidly. ‘You may therefore go on to London with your conscience satisfied.’

‘Go on to London and leave you here?’ Even speaking the words gives Hannibal pain, but he forces himself on. ‘And never see you again? Is that really what you want?’

There is the merest pause before Will replies quietly, ‘Yes.’

‘Even though you cried in my arms just now?’ Disappointment harshens Hannibal’s voice. ‘*Sobbed* because last summer I sent you away from me?’

Will’s expression of calm wavers. ‘Go to hell.’

His pace increases but Hannibal matches it easily.

‘Perhaps you truly are well. Perhaps you cried only because seeing me again was a shock. Perhaps you and the amiable Mr Bernard are lovers, and he makes you as happy as I warrant you once were with me.’

‘Lovers?’ Eyes blazing, Will rounds on him. ‘There you go again, assuming things that you cannot possibly know. Mr Bernard and I are old school friends. Until this night, I had not seen him since Eton! I have had no lover since you. Now are you satisfied?’

Acting purely on impulse, Hannibal yanks the boy into his arms. Will’s hands come up at once to push at his chest, but Hannibal makes no further move beyond staring into eyes the colour of a turbulent sky.

‘I do not think,’ he mutters distractedly, ‘that I shall ever be satisfied by anything again if I cannot make amends for the wrong I have done you.’

‘And you think that such high-handed behaviour as this is the way to go about it?’ snaps Will. ‘Release me at once, sir.’

Cheeks burning, breathing ragged, Hannibal lifts his hands in surrender and steps back. ‘I apologise. My manners tonight have been deplorable.’

‘Well, old habits die hard.’

The scorn in Will’s voice is admonishment enough, and with a defeated sigh Hannibal turns away, only to freeze as Will addresses him again in somewhat softer tones.

‘At the Lord Lieutenant's ball, you told me that you did not know me. You accused me of inconstancy, of game-playing. As if I had not already given myself to you in every conceivable way.’

Pain lances, and Hannibal bows his head. ‘I remember all too well what I said to you then, and I regret every word. I offer no excuses, Will, for what I did to you was indefensible. My pride was bruised, and I allowed a lifetime of resentment elsewhere to colour my feelings for *you*.’ His breath shudders out of him. ‘I was wrong to dismiss you summarily without allowing you to explain why you had kept your true identity hidden.’

‘My true last name - *not* my identity,’ insists Will, low and fierce. ‘That I *never* hid from you. Indeed, I was more myself with you than I have *ever* been with anyone else.’

‘Do not mistake me,’ says Hannibal earnestly. ‘I have been wretched over what I did, which is nothing less than I deserve, but in truth your banishment was a punishment for us both. These months without you have been the loneliest of my entire -’ His throat closes and he squeezes his eyes shut, hot tears seeping through.

‘Stop, please. Do not. I cannot bear it.’

How grieved Will sounds. Slender arms slide around Hannibal's neck, and this time it is *Will* pulling *him* close.

'You bloody, bloody fool.' It is an agonised whisper. 'I have loved you almost from the first moments of our acquaintance. And I came to believe that you loved me too. You cannot know how happy that made me. Yet you would have thrown it all away on a matter of principle.'

With a tortured groan, Hannibal presses his lips to Will's cheek, smooth and warm and scented. 'Of course I loved you. I love you still, most desperately. Dear gods, I have been half out of my mind for the loss of you. When I discovered that the Vergers were headed for Bath, I seized on the chance to accompany them, dreaming of the moment I would lay eyes on you again and bring meaning back into my miserable life. Except that when it finally happened, I once again allowed jealousy to get the better of me and succeeded only in making a complete ass of myself. I would not at all blame you if you were to give me up for a hopeless case.'

'Give you up? Now that I have you back in my arms? Never, never.'

On a half-sob, half-laugh, Will turns his head; and when their lips connect, Hannibal can barely restrain himself from plundering the sweetness so long denied him - so long denied them both. Yet he holds back, allowing Will to dictate the pace. If he is to be allowed back within his beloved's sphere then it must be on Will's terms. For having once taken his boy's power, Hannibal knows that only by surrendering his own can he hope to prove himself worthy of forgiveness.

Thus he remains almost passive beneath the tentative sweep of Will's lips over his own, parting them obediently when a tongue tip seeks entrance. Only when Will makes a small pleading sound does he suck that sweet little tongue into his mouth before opening, ravenous and desperate, beneath Will's demanding mouth.

Their hands are in each other's hair then, tugging and tightening, bodies melded from hip to chest. Thighs parted, legs slotted together, as close as their current circumstances will allow.

'My darling,' groans Hannibal, rubbing his nose against Will's before ravishing his mouth again. 'Oh, my beautiful darling, shall you come back to the Crescent with me? Allow me to lay you bare and make love to you and begin to make up for all of these awful months of separation?'

So soft and full of tenderness is Will's gaze that Hannibal does not at first register his words.

'No, indeed, my lord, I regret that I cannot do that.' With a sigh, he slides his tongue into Hannibal's mouth, laving against Hannibal's own, before slipping free. He raises his head, eyes wide in pseudo-innocence. 'I am expected at home, you see. But perhaps you would care to call on me tomorrow morning.'

Hannibal's heart sinks. 'Call on you at your family's home? And - shall you meet me there alone?'

'Of course not.' And now there is a hint of steel beneath the softness. 'My parents will naturally want to speak with you.'

'Your parents will want to *thrash* me.' He can feel himself paling. 'They know it all, I daresay.'

'They know enough.' Archly, then, 'You may wish to have a speech prepared.'

Hannibal swallows. Hard. It will need to be quite some speech if he is to avoid being called out. But he knows that he has no choice but to try. This is his chance. Will is giving him the way back in.

‘Very well, imp.’ He sighs and drops a kiss on the bridge of Will’s nose, which has pinked as prettily as his cheeks. ‘Tomorrow morning, then. What care I for another night of sleep lost?’

‘Another?’

‘Of course.’ Steady and frank is Hannibal’s gaze now. ‘Last night I could barely stay abed for want of seeing your face again.’

For that sentiment he is rewarded with a brief brush of lips against his own.

‘Come tomorrow at eleven,’ orders Will softly, ‘and afterwards you may accompany me to the Pump Room to meet your friends.’

‘Our friends.’ Nudging noses again, insistent.

Building bridges. Re-knitting ties.

‘*Our* friends.’

They walk on, Hannibal drawing Will’s arm through his to keep his boy as close as possible in these last few precious minutes before they must again part. The silence now is peaceable, yet beneath it thrum all the possibilities that lie before them. And Hannibal knows it is for *him* to ensure that they navigate the right ones.

At the gates of a long, tree-tunneled drive, they part. Will’s smile is sweet yet edged with an uncertainty that Hannibal curses himself for being the cause of.

‘If you decide upon reflection that you cannot call on me tomorrow, I shall always be glad for the words you spoke tonight,’ he says huskily.

‘Hush.’ Hannibal frames Will’s face between his hands. ‘I shall see you in the morning, my darling. It cannot come too soon for me.’

One final lingering kiss is necessary to soothe the flickering doubt - the fear - in Will’s eyes, and Hannibal forces himself to relinquish his possessive hold. Every step away seems a step in the wrong direction, yet if all goes well - and he is determined with every fibre of his being that it shall - then this will be the very *last* time that they are ever separated.

***

‘You have not eaten much, my dear. Are you sure that you are not sickening for something?’ Will’s mother sets down her own fork and glances worriedly from her son’s still almost-full breakfast plate to her husband. ‘Should we call for the physician?’

‘Mama, I assure you that I am quite well.’

For the umpteenth time, Will’s glance strays to the mantle clock. Half past ten. He catches his father’s eye and flushes at the shrewd light therein.

‘Expecting someone? Perhaps one of the young puppies who flocked around you last night, hm?’

‘As a matter of fact,’ he begins, and then almost jumps from his skin at the shrill ringing of the doorbell. *Dear gods*. Hannibal is early.

‘Aha. Light begins to dawn.’ Folding his newspaper, Benjamin Grantham rises from his chair at the head of the breakfast table. ‘Come, Maud. We shall repair to the morning room. You too, Will.’

Cheeks now hectic with colour, Will abandons his breakfast, skirting round the table. ‘Papa, I think that I should tell you -’

The entrance of the butler stops him cold.

‘Count Lecter requests an audience with Your Lordship.’

‘He what?’ squeaks Will.

‘*Count Lecter*?’ Gone now are all traces of the forbearing parent. Will’s father glares, thunderous. ‘*He* dares to come here?’

‘Benjamin.’ Laying a hand on her husband’s arm, Maud says quietly, ‘Hear the young man out before you consider throwing him from the house.’

‘Consider? What on earth is there to consider?’ growls Benjamin. ‘That rascal had our boy living with him openly for months!’

‘He did not know that I had any other home to go to. Papa, please. I told you all of this last summer.’ Wringing his hands, Will appeals desperately to his glowering father. ‘I truly believe that His Lordship has come to Bath to make amends. Please do not send him away.’

For long, tense moments, his father holds his gaze. Then he shifts his attention to the impassive butler. ‘Put him in my study. I shall be there shortly.’ And to Will and his mother, ‘Wait for us in the morning room.’

It is a tone which brooks no opposition. In a misery of anticipation, Will trails after his mother into the adjoining morning room, while his father strides grimly out into the hallway. What on earth can have possessed Hannibal to pursue an interview with Benjamin Grantham *alone*?

But then had not Will insisted upon his coming? Partly to punish, partly to get the inevitable scene out of the way? He should, perhaps, have realised that Hannibal would want to handle things on his own terms.

It is impossible for Will to sit and wait; and so when, a quarter of an hour later, the morning room door again opens, he is already halfway towards it. Hannibal enters first, rather resplendent in a long greatcoat and high-crowned hat, followed by Will’s father. Both wear almost identical expressions of inscrutability - but at least there appears to have been no blood-letting.

‘Will, you have my permission to accompany the count into town,’ says his father. And then, to Hannibal, sternly, ‘Until tomorrow night, sir.’

‘Thank you, my lord. I shall not fail you.’ Hannibal bows to Will’s mother. ‘Lady Wolfram.’

‘Count Lecter.’

Will is grateful for his mother’s gracious smile, and utterly perplexed by his father’s words. He is still puzzling them over as they walk out to the hallway.

Only when he is fastening his own greatcoat does he ask in low but urgent tones, ‘What was all that about? What did my father say to you? What is happening tomorrow night? Why even did you ask to

speak with him alone?'

To his frustration, Hannibal merely regards him with amusement until, once they are outside and approximately halfway down the drive (and thus out of sight of the house), he tugs Will into his arms with an impatient sound and dips his head to kiss him. And as many unanswered questions as Will has, he finds that they can all now wait, for he has been so long without this that he kisses back with devouring want. The slide of Hannibal's tongue is a delicious tease, Will's body waking up to the memory of how it feels to clutch tight and hot around his lover's cock. And he is quickly, agonisingly hard.

'Oh, sweet boy. This will not do.' Hannibal's palm comes down between them to cup him gently. The gravelliness of his voice betrays his own arousal. 'Would that I could take you somewhere now and give you relief.'

'Both of us, you mean.' Will looks pointedly at the tenting of his lover's breeches, biting his lip as he steps away. 'As that is not a possibility, we had better refrain from touching each other, I think.'

Hannibal laughs a trifle shakily. 'Or looking at each other.'

They resume their walk, the privacy of the long drive allowing time for a calming of their passions. And to help things along, Will reminds Hannibal pertly, 'You have still to answer my questions.'

'How could I forget?' comes the dry response. 'Oh, very well. I asked to speak with your father so that I might explain myself and perhaps go some way towards gaining an acquittal.'

'Well, you might have included me,' huffs Will.

But he lets it go. It is a minor miracle, after all, that his father has allowed Hannibal to survive the interview unscathed. And as Will was the one idiotic enough to have invited Hannibal into the lion's den in the first place, he supposes that he should thank the gods for a narrow escape and let that be an end to it.

As they join the main thoroughfare, they are engulfed in the bustle of a warm spring day in Bath: ladies carrying parasols, gentlemen twirling silver-topped canes, murmured 'good days' and 'how d'you dos' and polite nods.

'Are you acquainted with the whole of Bath society?' asks Hannibal, a measure of irritation lacing his obvious amusement.

'Are you jealous?' Will parries with great interest. And, when Hannibal merely scowls, 'As a matter of fact, I have hardly shown my face in Bath these eight months. Perhaps some people have exceptional memories.'

'Or are exceptionally inquisitive,' sniffs Hannibal.

'Well, now that you have dismissed the general populace of Bath, perhaps you would like to demolish its architecture as well.' Will gestures to the noble portico and Corinthian half columns that characterise the South Colonnade of the Grand Pump Room. 'But first, the waters of Bath await. After you, my lord.'

His outstretched hand is swiftly captured and tucked into the crook of Hannibal's arm. 'We shall go in together,' he says, with a firmness that secretly delights Will.

Hence, upon their entrance into the gracious marble-floored interior, they are sprung upon almost instantly by a triumphant-looking Lady Margot.

‘There, Mason,’ she says, with a look of vast satisfaction. ‘I told you, when our dear count went chasing after Will last night, that we would find them together today as cosy as you please.’

‘Lady Margot, I beg you to spare Will’s blushes,’ says Hannibal reprovingly, ‘and direct us to these famous waters that I have heard so much about. I should like to compare them with the spring water to be found in Matlock and Buxton.’

‘And should you prefer to find them wanting in comparison?’ mocks Will lightly.

‘Not at all,’ protests Hannibal, as they follow Lady Margot and her chuckling brother to where a large vase of sculpted marble gushes water from slender taps. ‘I am not, I hope, of that insufferable breed which demands that the county of their birth be considered superior to every other.’

There is a pause in conversation while cups are filled and passed around the group.

‘The water is warm.’ Mason wrinkles his nose, sniffing doubtfully at the brim of his cup.

‘Of course,’ says Will. ‘Its source is a hot spring. It apparently contains forty-three minerals and is said to be most beneficial to one’s health.’

The visitors sip tentatively, exchanging glances, until Hannibal sets down his cup with a definitive, ‘That is foul.’

Laughter bubbles up inside Will’s chest, and Lady Margot swipes at him playfully. ‘You knew that we would find it so.’

‘I had an idea.’ Setting down his own cup untouched, Will grins. ‘I cannot abide the stuff.’

‘Now, Will Grantham!’ Mason tuts in mock sternness. ‘This will never do. You are grown far too satirical for ordinary company.’

‘But since none of you are at all ordinary, I cannot think of altering.’

At this pronouncement, Will finds his arm seized and hugged by Lady Margot.

‘Certainly you must never alter, for you are quite perfect. Is not that so, my lord?’ she asks, with a mischievous smile for Hannibal.

‘Mr Grantham knows what I think of him,’ comes the gruff rejoinder.

‘I hope that I do,’ replies Will softly, and as his eyes meet Hannibal’s across the fountain, all else fades away, the unrestrained ardour of Hannibal’s gaze making him tremble.

‘Oh, my.’ Gently, Lady Margot nudges Will, her voice threaded with affectionate understanding. ‘I think we had better all take a turn about the room.’

‘Good idea,’ says Mason with a wink. ‘Particularly as Meg has been dying to tell you all the tattle from Derbyshire.’

Dutifully they join the throng of gentlemen and ladies who circle the room, all walking in stately solemnity, acknowledging acquaintances with gracious inclinations of the head. With Lady Margot on

one side, feeding him gossip in hushed tones, and Hannibal hovering protectively on the other, Will is occupied fully with his little party. And what news he has missed since Lady Margot's last letter! For it seems that the Lord Lieutenant has run off to Italy with his dowager duchess.

'Poor Alana,' sighs Lady Margot. 'We are taking care of her as best we can.'

'*You* certainly are, Meg,' jibes her brother gently.

'Oh? And what of your own news?' Gleeful, Lady Margot turns again to Will. 'Our boy here has only got himself engaged to the rather lovely Marquess of Huntingdon.'

'Verger, how marvellous! Congratulations!'

'Oh, and at the end of February, Clementine birthed another litter.'

With so much to celebrate, it is agreed that the party shall come together again for dinner at Hannibal's lodgings. Yet when they part, the Vergers to meet with their parents for luncheon, Will ostensibly to return home, he finds that he cannot bear the idea of leaving Hannibal again so soon.

And so when, with a lingering look, Hannibal whispers in his ear, 'Will you come back with me now, darling?' Will nods frantically.

His hand is curled tightly around Hannibal's arm, his head full of his love, and conversation dwindles as they hurry towards the Royal Crescent.

A solemn-faced footman opens the door for them, and with a few curt phrases Hannibal makes it clear that he and his guest are returned for a rest and a game of chess in his chambers, and are not under any circumstances to be disturbed. In the meantime, a servant is to be dispatched to Wolfram Hall, to inform the Granthams of their son's engagements and to beg their pardon for his absence at dinner.

The necessary business thus discharged, Will follows Hannibal up two flights of stairs and along a generously proportioned landing to a suite of rooms which occupies approximately two thirds of the floor space. All about them is freshness and elegance, light and airiness. And yet all that he cares about is the prospect of once more being joined in the most intimate way possible with the man he loves beyond thought or reason.

***

Hannibal can feel the boy beside him practically vibrating with urgency. It is as much as he is capable of to close the bedchamber door and turn the key in the lock before tugging Will into his arms, fastening their mouths together, and kissing him with utter abandonment.

'Gods, but I want you,' he groans, cupping Will's pert bottom and pulling him flush against him. 'Can you feel how much? I long to be inside you again, my darling.'

'Yes,' whimpers Will. 'Oh, please, yes. Take me and fill me. I would be round with your spend.'

They undress each other, a messy affair hampered by the constant need to kiss and nuzzle and murmur endearments. Rediscovering his boy is a delight: remembering how his mouth at Will's chest brings a delightful tide of colour sweeping across cheeks still youthfully round, and the way featherlight strokes of his slender cock set him squirming and whining for more.

When at last both are naked, Hannibal leads Will to the bed, to lie back together on the coverlet.

‘Sweet darling,’ tongue laving first one pink nipple then the other, until both stand pebbled and glistening, ‘I would make love to you all day and have you be my nourishment.’

‘Mm.’ Will’s hand wanders to curl lightly about Hannibal’s cock. ‘And would you be mine? Allow me to drink from you?’

Stiffening even more beneath that soft touch, Hannibal rolls his hips in encouragement. ‘Perhaps a very little. But I intend to spill inside you, to mark you again as mine.’

‘How very primitive of you.’ The darkening of Will’s eyes belies his mocking tone. ‘Then first let me taste, and then you may take.’

The first touch of Will’s lips to Hannibal's cockhead is exquisite torture, a delicate lipping that evolves to flicking licks, cool against his heated flesh. With a gentle hand on Will’s jaw, Hannibal guides him to take the tip within his mouth; and when the boy starts sucking eagerly, Hannibal’s head drops back, eyes half-closed in pleasure. The tight heat of that wicked little mouth threatens to be his undoing, for Will is well-versed in this particular practice. The knowledge that it was not he who taught the boy to mouth-fuck is inconsequential - for whatever and whomever came before, Will is now entirely *his*, just as surely as he is Will’s.

The tightening of his muscles is a forewarning, and he tugs Will up to lick into his kiss-swollen mouth, uncaring that he can taste himself on his boy’s reddened lips.

Reaching beneath the pile of pillows, he retrieves a small glass vial stopped with a cork. At Will’s arch look, he grins.

‘I purchased it yesterday at the apothecary’s. Presumptuous, perhaps, but you know that it was meant only for you, my love.’

With a mollified head toss, Will holds out his hand, palm up. ‘Then let me prepare myself for you.’

Oh, the pleasure then of reclining on one elbow, stroking himself idly while watching Will’s oil-slicked fingers - first one, then a second - working in and out of that tight rosebud hole. Lying back, Hannibal reaches for his boy to straddle him, to grasp Hannibal’s turgid cock and lower himself slowly upon it until he is impaled fully. Will’s head is bowed, face partially concealed by a curtain of dark hair, bottom lip quivering.

‘Will?’ With tender concern, Hannibal reaches up and tangles his fingers in damp curls, pushing them back to reveal glistening blue eyes. ‘Darling, what is it?’

‘Nothing, I -’ A fat tear rolls down Will’s cheek and Hannibal smooths it away with his thumb. ‘It is only that for so long I thought you lost to me. And now, to be with you again like this - to be truly yours -’

‘You *are* mine.’ It is a fierce vow. ‘As I am yours. Forever, Will, do you hear?’

‘Yes.’

On an aching sigh, Will dips to kiss him, soft and seeking, and Hannibal returns each press of lips, each stroke of tongues, murmuring between kisses grown increasingly urgent, ‘My darling, my beauty, my angel, my love.’

And he groans, long and low, as Will begins to ride him in slow undulations, strong inner muscles clenching hard around his cock in an exquisite milking.

He sets his thumbs to Will's nipples, brushing back and forth across the sensitive little nubs until Will is arching into his touch, head thrown back, fingers pressing into Hannibal's thighs. Possessive, Hannibal trails his hands lower to span his lover's narrow waist. And then lower still, to fondle and squeeze the stiff cock which dribbles copious amounts of precome onto Hannibal's stomach.

'Do you want to come, darling? Hm?' He strokes harder, pulling delicious 'ugh, ugh' sounds from his boy. 'Shall I help you?'

In a flash he rolls them, still connected. He rears up, hands clamping on Will's slender thighs, and fucks deep and hard in rolling thrusts. He adjusts the angle so that his cockhead brushes that hidden sweet spot with every pass, and dips to capture Will's mouth, swallowing his high-pitched cries. They move together frantically as both careen towards the final ecstasy. And when it comes, Hannibal's orgasm is blinding in its intensity. He stiffens, muffling harsh groans of release against Will's neck, pumping his seed deep. And as he shudders in wave after wave of aftershock, he feels Will keen and spurt his own release hot and wet between them.

They lie pressed together until the racing of their hearts settles and Hannibal grows soft inside Will's body. Finally slipping free, he kisses the murmur of protest from Will's pleasure-slackened mouth.

'Come, darling. Allow me to tend you.'

It is the work of a few minutes to utilise the adjoining washroom; and when they are again clean and dry, Hannibal strips free the soiled counterpane and pulls Will back down onto the bed. On their sides they face each other, gazes soft, touches tender.

'I am only now realising how very badly I did without you for all of those awful months.' Hannibal tucks a stray curl behind Will's ear, regret lacing his tone. 'I threw myself so much into work on the estate that I hardly allowed myself time to think, let alone feel.'

'I lost myself in my books,' admits Will. 'It was easier to withdraw from the world than face how I was feeling. I see now that I was afraid to.'

'The loss was too great.' Hannibal sighs. 'And the responsibility for that lies with me.'

'No.' Will reaches for Hannibal's hand, sliding their palms together. 'It lies with both of us. I should not have kept the truth of my circumstances from you.'

'Yet what inducement did you have to share it? We came together in so uncommon a manner. Personal confidences were not part of the bargain.'

'Not at first. Yet when Lord Wyvern intruded with his lies and machinations, you trusted me.'

'I have a proposition,' murmurs Hannibal, dropping a kiss on lips curled now in a dissatisfied pout. 'Let us share the blame - and the forgiveness - equally. For I would far rather go forward with a new understanding between us than continue to dwell on a past that cannot be altered. What say you?'

Arms wind tightly about his neck, Will's lithe body pressing close. 'I say yes, for I love you most terribly, and I would that not another cross word is exchanged between us.'

'Will.' Breath catching, Hannibal slants his mouth over his boy's, taking him in a kiss of tender worship. When he draws back, his eyes glimmer with unshed tears. 'Oh, how I love you, my sweet boy. So very much. I may not deserve you -'

‘Indeed you do!’ comes the fierce assertion. ‘You are my match, Hannibal Lecter, and I do not wish to ever spend another day apart from you.’ Will pulls back a little, his blue gaze troubled. ‘I only fear now my parents’ interference.’

‘As to that,’ grazing kisses across Will’s jaw and down the pale slope of his neck, ‘have faith and patience, my love. For I am determined to win them over.’

‘But - are not you leaving Bath soon for Parliament?’

Hannibal smiles. ‘Now that I know you are mine, dear heart, I shall remain here until I may take you away with me. Parliament,’ he adds feelingly, ‘can go to the devil.’

And rolling Will beneath him once more, he proceeds to demonstrate with hands and lips his absolute devotion.

***

They spend much of the remainder of the day in bed, alternately dozing, talking and making love. Hannibal rings for a tray of food to sustain them through the afternoon, and like naughty children they stifle their giggles at the hesitant knock and receding footsteps of the servant who leaves it outside the door.

A rising tide of happiness has rendered Will susceptible to easy tears, which threaten every time he thinks of having to part from Hannibal at the evening’s end. It is quite ridiculous, of course, given their recent separation of several months. But then he had been shored up by pride and anger; now, his defences are gone, stripped away by fervent declarations of love and fidelity.

They dress again for dinner and receive the Vergers in the ground floor parlour, wherein the party enjoys a splendid repast which includes fresh catches from the fish market on the river quay, and a plate of Sally Lunn buns, served warm with a large pat of butter. It is a happy gathering, and much merriment is had in discussions of which famous persons are rumoured to be staying in Bath, after which the conversation turns to the concert which is to be held at the Upper Rooms the following evening.

‘Shall you be in attendance, dear Will?’

‘I shall, Lady Margot. If only because my parents have been rather insistent on the subject.’ Will wrinkles his nose. ‘For myself, I do not care much for such occasions, when the music always seems to matter less than the opportunity for idle gossip and cake.’

‘Ah, never underestimate the power of cake in livening up an otherwise dull recital,’ grins Mason.

Dinner is followed by a few rounds of cards, at the end of which they all walk out together. The pavements are now almost empty, only the most determined revellers daring the darkened streets. And after waving off the Vergers, tucked up in the safety of their closed carriage, Hannibal insists upon accompanying Will back to the gates of Wolfram Hall.

‘Tomorrow I have several important commissions to undertake which shall, I fear, prevent me from seeing you before evening,’ says Hannibal, as they stand just within the driveway, arms around each other. ‘But perhaps at the concert I may devise a way to be close to you.’

‘I shall not allow my parents to cut you,’ declares Will.

‘Oh, I am not worried on that score,’ comes the rather enigmatic reply. ‘But what of your Mr Bernard? Shall he challenge me to a duel for your attentions, do you suppose?’

‘I cannot think why you are so preoccupied with the fellow!’

‘Because,’ says Hannibal, bending his head to whisper teasingly against Will’s lips, ‘I saw at once that *he* is much preoccupied with *you*.’

‘Jealous fool,’ mutters Will fondly, before tipping forward and claiming his lover’s mouth in a long, deep kiss.

***

Wednesday dawns fair and bright, the weather having settled finally into a pattern of clemency. Woken by the sun, Will eats a sparing breakfast before taking a few restless turns about the grounds.

Predictably, the hours before the concert pass excessively slowly, and the atmosphere within Wolfram Hall itself seems to be tinged with a strange expectancy: more than once, Will catches his parents observing him and then murmuring between themselves. Doubtless they are suffering some anxiety of mind over his renewed acquaintance with Hannibal, and so over luncheon he endeavours to be cheerful and talkative while assiduously avoiding the one topic that is surely on all of their minds.

Whatever the engagements that have kept Hannibal from him during the course of the day, Will entertains no doubts of his failing to keep their evening rendezvous. Assurances exchanged, intimacies renewed, he feels secure at last in Hannibal’s affections. Nevertheless, his spirits are in quite a flutter as the carriage trundles slowly through the dark streets, following the link boy who runs ahead, oil lamp held aloft.

‘You look very handsome tonight, Will.’ His mother beams from beneath her satin headdress. ‘I am so glad that you are come out again into society at last. Of course,’ she continues with a teasing wink, ‘after receiving our visitor yesterday, I understand why.’

‘Leave the boy alone, Maud.’ His father looks positively indulgent as he declares, ‘All young people must be allowed to have their secrets.’

‘Thank you, Papa.’

Such generosity of spirit prompts a fresh wave of shame at the memory of how meanly he had regarded his father for so many months and how terribly he had behaved in retribution for a sin that was wholly imagined. Will resolves to do better, to be fully deserving of his parents’ regard and trust. Whatever difficulties might present themselves in the coming days, he cannot simply disappear again, no matter how great the inducement.

This sobering realisation - at odds with Hannibal’s tender declaration that he means to whisk Will away with him once his time in Bath is at an end - coincides with their arrival at the Upper Rooms, and Will alights from the carriage with a preoccupied frown.

From the vestibule they are directed to the tea room, a well-proportioned chandeliered space from whence drift the sounds of an instrument being tuned. Having arrived reasonably early, they are able to take refreshment without the usual tiresome practise of queuing, after which they secure chairs only a few rows from the front, where a large harpsichord stands framed by the columned balcony, its railings decorated for the occasion with white flowers and trailing ivy.

‘What shall we be listening to tonight?’ asks Will, turning his eyes to the crowded entrance, impatient for a glimpse of his lover’s imposing figure.

‘The Goldberg Variations.’ His mother smiles gently. ‘Move down one place and you may save a seat for the count.’

Startled, Will glances across at his father, who raises his eyebrows but otherwise offers no objection.

‘Thank you, Mama.’

Unfortunately, no sooner has Will vacated his chair than it is seized upon by a rather merry-looking Peter Bernard.

‘Grantham, well met!’ By the glassiness of his friend’s expression, Will surmises that he has indulged in rather too many pre-concert drinks. ‘I was hoping to see you here tonight. Is this seat taken?’

‘Well, actually -’ Will casts another longing glance at the entrance, but still there is no sign of Hannibal. ‘No, I suppose not,’ he says reluctantly.

Several minutes later, every chair has been taken; and after a brief announcement by the Master of Ceremonies, the harpsichordist walks out to take up his station. As the audience breaks into polite applause, and the first bars of the opening Aria echo around the room, disappointment lodges in Will’s chest.

He is about to slump back in his seat in resignation when a prickling sensation spurs him to look round once more. And there stands Hannibal, observing him rather darkly from the doorway. Without a thought for decorum, Will stands up at once and squeezes past a confused-looking Peter.

‘Excuse me, I must just go out for a moment.’

He hurries up the side aisle towards Hannibal, whose expression has softened somewhat by the time Will reaches him.

‘Where have you been? I had a seat reserved for you.’

‘Which appears to have been claimed by another.’

But there is no bite to the words. In fact, if anything, Hannibal seems somewhat distracted.

‘No matter. I shall stand with you,’ declares Will. ‘Come, there is a space by the fireplace over there.’

But as he takes Hannibal’s gloved hand to lead him into the room, he is tugged out into the empty vestibule.

‘Will,’ murmurs Hannibal, gaze strangely earnest as he grasps Will's other hand, ‘there is something that I would speak with you about first.’

‘I, too.’ Will tightens his hands around Hannibal’s. ‘I know that you want to take me away with you, but my parents have suffered so much already on account of my irresponsible behaviour, I cannot disappoint them again or expose them further to public speculation. Do you understand?’

‘Of course I do.’ His fingers are squeezed in reassurance. ‘Believe me, the very last thing that I wish to do is provide the ton with more gossip fodder.’

‘Then,’ brow furrowing, ‘what do you propose we do?’

‘What do I propose? Why, that we - that you -’

***

Despite the fact that prior to his entrance he had been pacing outside the Upper Rooms for a good ten minutes, rehearsing his lines with earnest diligence, Hannibal is heartily dismayed by his sudden inability to recall a single one. Releasing Will’s hands, he fumbles in his pocket and withdraws a small square box, which he thrusts at Will with uncharacteristic clumsiness.

And as his boy, cheeks blooming, eyes huge, eases open the lid with fingers that tremble, Hannibal blurts out the only two words that he can remember.

‘Marry me.’

Silence sings. Will, gaze fixed on the contents of the satin-lined box, exhales shakily. And all that Hannibal can do is wait.

‘A Posey ring?’

‘An engagement ring, if you will have me,’ corrects Hannibal huskily.

Carefully, Will plucks the ring from its bed and examines it. Composed of two joined hands of gold, it is hinged at the reverse. And engraved within, in tiny script, are words which he reads aloud in an uneven voice:

‘*Little ladybird, you are my home*.’

Eyes shining with laughter, with tears, lift to Hannibal’s.

And his heart threatens to stop when his minx of a boy pauses for what seems an eternity before holding out the ring with a mischievous grin.

‘Then you had best put it on my finger.’

Such an instruction is not to be hesitated upon.

‘Give me your hand.’ Slowly, with the utmost reverence, Hannibal peels off Will’s left glove before sliding the ring onto his finger. The fit is a little loose but not prohibitively so, and the jeweller has already offered to resize the ring if necessary. Bowing his head, Hannibal places a tender kiss upon it. And then, cupping Will’s jaw, he brushes their lips together. ‘I love you, Will Grantham. More than I have ever loved another human being in all of my life. Please do me the very great honour of accepting me as your husband.’

Against his lips, Will whispers, ‘I love you, Hannibal Lecter. With the whole of my heart and to the depths of my soul, I love you. Of course I will marry you. You shall be entirely mine forever.’

They share a kiss of gentle sweetness, yet when they break apart a shadow has crossed Will’s features.

‘What if my parents should not give their consent? Oh, Hannibal,’ clutching his arm, ‘I could not bear it if they refused. What would we do then?’

‘Well, there is always elopement.’ And hastily, at Will’s stricken look, ‘Darling, I am teasing.’ Leaning in, Hannibal murmurs, ‘Why do you think that I asked to speak with your father alone yesterday?’

Will stares at him. ‘You sought his permission to marry me?’

‘I sought his permission to *ask*. You are your own person, after all.’

Still Will appears slightly stunned. ‘Do you mean to say that Papa gave his consent?’

‘Eventually.’ Dryly, Hannibal recalls, ‘It took much diplomacy and apology on my part, but in the end your father seemed satisfied that I was not the unfeeling rake of his imaginings.’

‘Now I understand the looks my parents have been giving me all day. Honestly,’ and Will shoves him in playful reprimand, ‘you might have asked me yesterday and saved me all of that.’

‘I almost did,’ Hannibal admits. ‘When I had you warm and happy in my bed, I wanted most desperately to know that I could look forward to a lifetime of such bliss. But after my appalling behaviour in Derbyshire, I wished to make the occasion special for you.’

‘So you went shopping for a ring and had it engraved. And these, I suppose, were the *important commissions* that kept you from me today.’ Will’s tone is only mildly reproachful as he studies the interlocked hands atop the ring. ‘Handfasting. I shall treasure it always and never shall it be removed. But,’ taking hold of Hannibal’s gloved left hand and brushing his thumb across the third finger, ‘what of this? I would have the world know that you are mine just as surely as I am yours.’

‘In that case, I think it a very good plan for us to go shopping together. What say you to tomorrow morning?’ At Will’s eager nod, Hannibal smiles and drops a kiss on the tip of his nose. ‘We can discuss all of the particulars later. But now perhaps we should go in and join your parents. I would not wish to risk their disapproval so early in our courtship.’

‘Courtship.’

How lovely it is to see Will blush in pleasure. Even lovelier is the next moment, when Hannibal is drawn into a fervent embrace. And he thinks, as their lips meet in a kiss that quickly deepens into passionate intensity, of the very good fortune that nudged them into each other’s paths one sultry summer evening and swapped two lost souls for one family.

Chapter End Notes

The entrance to Bath's Grand Pump Room, built at the end of the eighteenth century:

And here is the marble vase from which patrons of the Pump Room have been sampling Bath's famous spring waters for more than two centuries:

And so, my lovely readers, on we go to the epilogue and the end of Will and Hannibal's story!

Home

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

They are married in Bath on a beautiful morning in April, drifts of pink cherry blossom dappling the sunshine, mingling with the showers of rice thrown over the departing couple. Their Lordships, in turn, toss gleaming copper coins from the Lecter family carriage, which had been driven down by Franklyn the previous week in order to carry them home in comfort and privacy.

It has been a fine turnout: in attendance are the Vergers and their parents; Lord Huntingdon and his sister Lady Cassandra; the Lords Price; Peter Bernard (who assures Will with a grin that he is only a very little heartbroken) and his parents; and a not inconsiderable number of fellow peers and Members of Parliament. Anthony Grantham, too, has made the trip south for the occasion, and Will is more than ever glad of his brother's recent move to Derbyshire when the time comes for him to part with his parents. He bids them farewell with a tearful promise to bring his husband back to Bath for Christmas, and Hannibal issues them with an open invitation to visit Lecter House as often as they please.

Tolerable weather and good roads deliver the newlyweds to Derbyshire within two and a half days, and Will awakens on their first morning back to a series of languid kisses down his neck and a murmured, 'Good morning, my beautiful husband.'

Will snares the hand which rests on his hip and raises it to his lips, brushing a kiss over the plain gold wedding band that matches his own. And another over the engagement ring which they had chosen together in Bath - a garnet within a circle of onyx, a tender wink to their unusual beginning.

'Mm.' Rolling over, he presses close to his husband and grins. 'It certainly is a good morning. Is there anything that I can do to make it better still?'

'Well, as a matter of fact…' Hannibal's free hand bunches up the hem of Will's nightshirt to curl around his thickening length. 'We do need to consummate this marriage, after all.'

'Oh? And what was it that we were doing last night? And the night before that?' asks Will, slipping his thigh over Hannibal's and rocking into that teasing, stroking hand.

'Coaching inns do not count,' sniffs Hannibal. 'Besides, it was impossible to truly relax on either occasion.'

'Only because you were so very prudish about the thinness of the walls.' Will squirms pleasurably beneath Hannibal's sure touch. 'I would not have minded if we had been overheard.'

'Of course you would not, you little wretch,' growls Hannibal, nipping at Will's lower lip. 'Even for the sake of a mere two days' wait.'

'It has been near a month since we have had proper privacy,' points out Will, his own hands now busy tugging up Hannibal's nightshirt. 'Whoever knew that getting married would involve so much chaperoning?'

'Well, as I intend that for the next week we shall leave this bed only to eat, we have ample opportunity to make up for the whole tiresome business. And now, if you please,' as pushing Will onto his back and straddling him, Hannibal lowers himself onto Will's cock with a pleased groan, 'fuck me, darling.'

Evidently, Hannibal had worked himself open while Will slept; and welcomed into the hot clutch of his lover's body, Will gasps words of adoration against lips parted in ecstasy. He grasps Hannibal's hips and fucks up in shallow passes to draw his lover to taut pleasure, rocking gradually deeper and harder, bringing himself to the brink of his own climax.

'Come with me,' he pants, hips jerking in erratic thrusts as he finishes with a hot spill.

And as Hannibal arches with a shout, pearly spend spurting sticky, Will clings to him and tells him again and again how much he loves him.

***

One leisurely bath later, they descend to the Painted Hall and a warm greeting from Chilton.

‘Breakfast is ready, my lords.’

‘I did not realise that Chilton could smile so widely,’ whispers Will as they follow the butler through to the Oak Room, where buttery light spills through the windows. ‘I swear, when first I arrived, he thought me nothing but a menace!’

‘Darling, you *were* a menace. However,’ at Will’s pout, ‘you were a very *charming* menace, which makes all the difference.’

***

After Hannibal’s seductive promise to keep him abed for days, Will is fully expecting to be dragged back upstairs once the breakfast things are cleared. Instead, a walk outside is proposed. And since there are ample opportunities for privacy in the gardens, Will readily agrees.

They stroll through the Sculpture Gallery, in the centre of which stands a new plinth, and Will eyes it with interest.

‘Is this for your rutting stags?’

‘Not exactly.’ Hannibal grins. ‘Those are to be life-sized. No, this is for a new enterprise, which shall begin in approximately a fortnight’s time when Signor Canova arrives to take the preliminary sketches.’ The next moment, Will’s face is cupped and tilted for tender appraisal. ‘You shall make a subject so glorious as to rival his Endymion.’

‘I?’ exclaims Will. And, in alarm, ‘I hope that you do not entertain ideas of a nude study.’

‘My, how prim you have grown,’ laughs Hannibal. ‘But you need not fear, my darling. That is a sight which I would much prefer to reserve for my sole pleasure. No, it shall be a bust, my wedding gift to you.’

‘A bust of myself?’ Will wrinkles his nose. ‘I would rather it were of you.’

‘Well, I admit that it is also something of a gift to myself; therefore it is not your only present. Come with me.’

And on this mysterious note, Hannibal leads Will through into the orangery. There they find Randall guarding a large wicker chest, the lid of which is being pushed up by something snuffling and whining inside. It sounds, to Will’s ears, suspiciously like…

‘A puppy?’ Throwing decorum to the wind, he runs across the room and drops to his knees before the chest. ‘You got me a puppy?’

As if sensing that the time is right for escape, the animal begins scrabbling madly, and Will has barely lifted the lid an inch before it is thrust wide open by sizeable paws and a shining snout. Moments later, he is bowled over by a bundle of energy, the puppy’s coat a smooth grey, its eyes beseeching blue.

‘I did, to poor Chilton’s dismay. It is a boy, almost nine weeks of age.’ Smiling, Hannibal perches on the adjacent bench. ‘Do you like him?’

‘He is beautiful.’ Will laughs as the puppy sniffs around him and seizes the tail of his coat between sharp little teeth, tugging insistently. ‘I think that he is in need of some tiring out, however, otherwise I fear for your exquisite furnishings.’

‘*Our* furnishings,’ comes the soft reminder. ‘And as I think that you are right, I suggest that we put him into Franklyn’s hands for a time. He will train him up admirably.’

‘As long as we can have him back with us in the evenings.’ Will scratches behind the puppy’s ears. ‘I presume he has come from Boarham Hall.’

‘Indeed. I was allowed the pick of Clementine’s litter. And the Vergers would not accept a penny for him.’

‘Then we must be sure to invite them to dinner next week as a thank you.’

After a half hour more of play, the puppy flops at Hannibal’s feet and proceeds to fall into a contented doze. Randall scoops him up and takes his leave, allowing Will and Hannibal to commence their walk.

‘What would you like to name him?’ asks Hannibal, arm firm around Will’s waist as they set off across the lawn.

‘Hm. What think you of Winston?’

‘Very smart. You have excellent taste in names.’

‘How agreeable you are being.’ Will grins up at his handsome husband. ‘You do not need to court me now, you know. You have me, signed and sealed.’

‘The second and final contract between us.’ Hannibal tugs him to a stop and frames his face with gentle hands. ‘But I shall never stop courting you, Will Lecter-Grantham. For if I did, you might think me to be taking you for granted. And then my little ladybird might fly away.’

‘Ladybirds fly away home, and I am home already,’ Will reminds him with a soft smile.

He pulls Hannibal into a kiss. And then no more words are needed. They are both home. They are each other’s home.

Chapter End Notes

Meet Winston!

And now we must leave Will and Hannibal, and all their friends, and bid goodbye to Regency Derbyshire. It has been a joy to share the boys' story with you over the last (almost) four months. But they are together and happy now, and they need no more from me. :) Thank you, from the bottom of my heart, for coming on this journey with me. Until the next time, gentle readers!
Much love,
Teacup. <3

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!